

THE PHONE BOOTH

John Boston

Jared Cousins was down on his luck. He hit it big on a KENO ticket a few years ago and walked away with over sixty thousand dollars, but since then, he had lost more than he made. Such was the nature of a gambling junkie. Problem was, you had to have money to gamble in the first place and Jared was flat broke. He had less than a hundred dollars to his name. He didn't even have enough money to put gas in his car.

Jared was born to hustle, not to slave.

He had a job for about six months at a pawn shop. He was a laborer on a concrete setup crew for about a month. That was all the work he had done over the past three years. He had been living off his girlfriend who simply told him to pack up his shit and to get out of her house. It had been a rough couple of days. Jared needed about ten grand to get back in the game. He had learned his lesson and would not be making the same mistakes again.

Cause even a junkie has to have some self-control.

He was trying to get to Vegas to see some old friends and get back on his feet. Vegas had changed so much over the years he barely recognized the city. It was becoming as congested as Los Angeles.....and it sure as hell was not the City of Angels anymore.

He ran out of gas on the I-40. He was headed to Laughlin to see his father and possibly get a few bucks. His car began to sputter and the low gas light came on. He knew he was screwed. He was still a hundred miles away from Laughlin. It was getting hot. He knew he had to find someplace to get some water and spend the night. A person could die out here if they weren't careful.

He saw a sign headed down a gravel road. He was hoping he could find civilization there. He only had a soda and the chips he had bought this morning before leaving Riverside.

The sign read: DAFNEY POP 14

Why would you even bother putting up a sign for a town with only 14 people?

He drove for another ten minutes. The Joshua trees were getting heavy and heavier. His car was now coasting on fumes as he pulled into the ghost town of DAFNEY. Jared had never seen a town quite like this.

DAFNEY was nothing more than a collection of dilapidated houses and buildings. There had been a gas station here at one point, as well as a mine, but that was decades ago. He parked his car behind the remains of the gas station and turned off the engine. He had no cell service or gas or food or water.

Jared ol boy, you really did it good this time. Even a ten-year-old would have thought ahead and taken some water while crossing the Mojave Desert in the middle of summer.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead and walked into what was left of the gas station. He tried the faucets, but no water came out. He searched the other buildings for water, but couldn't find any. He figured he would just wait until the sun went down, then walk back to the highway and look for help.

If he didn't die of dehydration first.

Just when he was losing hope, he saw a small pipe in back with a faucet. It was hooked up to a bunch of barrels that were high off the ground. It must have been used as a water stand. He turned on the faucet and a small, but steady stream of water began to trickle out. He grabbed his cup and began to fill it up. He had no idea how long the water had been sitting there, but he had no choice. He pinched his nose and began gulping it down. He was on his fifth cup when he decided to turn it off. It might be the only water he gets for quite a while. Time to start thinking logically. No more flying by the seat of your pants. That's for kids. Jared was now over thirty. It was time to start thinking like an adult.

He dumped his soda on the ground and filled up the water bottle. The water looked drinkable, not that he really had any choice. If he got sick, he could easily die out here in this heat. He walked back over to his car, grabbed his bag of chips, and found some shade. He had only three smokes left, better make them count. He lit one up. He had to take a moment to step back and appreciate the seriousness of his situation.

Jared was up to his neck in shit and sinking deeper by the minute.

He was literally at the end of his rope. He had no place to go and no way to get there. The real stinger was the fact that he had done it all to himself. Being here was the result of the choices he had made in his life. How had it come to this? He was basically broke and homeless. He desperately needed a big win to get back on his feet. Gambling junkies are always just one big away from retiring.....at least that's what they tell themselves.

It was going to be dark in a few hours. This was not going to be fun. He hadn't been camping since he was a kid and he didn't like it one bit.

He walked around the buildings and cabins, looking for anything he could use. He wondered what the people were like who lived here nearly a hundred years ago. They were probably just as poor and miserable as he was.

He found a picture of a man and woman. He had to wonder who they were and why they chose to live in a place as desolate as this. Maybe they just liked privacy?

He had no cell service on his phone. Even if he did, he had no one to call. Most of his family had friends who had written him off long ago. If they weren't going to loan him money, *then what the hell good were they?*

He ate the last of his chips as he watched the sun go down. In a place as remote and desolate as this, your thoughts become amplified and seem to echo around everywhere. He was robbed of almost ten grand by a bookie. He says Jared never placed a bet with him. Jared could have killed him. He had to wonder if he would still be here if the bookie had paid. He was mob-connected, so there really wasn't much he could do. You can't write an online review for a bookie.

He was seriously considering walking to the highway and catching a ride back to civilization when he heard it. He hadn't heard one in years, not since he was a child. It was a sound he never forgot.

A telephone was ringing.

He jumped to his feet and ran around to the front of the gas station. He was shocked to hear the phone ringing in the phone booth. He pushed open the broken door and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he said softly.

"Hey, it's me."

"Okay," he said hesitantly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Jared.

"We're going to do this tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. You got the money?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Don't fuck this up. It's a simple exchange. A fucking monkey could do this without screwing it up."

"Yeah, got it."

"Alright. Man, can you believe Buckner? I made ten grand on that series. Ten thousand dollars. I still can't believe it. Those Mets all play better on coke. I kept telling him that, but he wouldn't listen. Now, the old bastard owes me ten grand. Shoes on the other foot now, huh?"

"Is he going to pay?" said Jared. He had no idea what he was doing, but it seemed to be working.

"He better. He's the one who made the bet, remember?"

"That's a lot of money." said Jared

"Not for him, it isn't. You alright. You kind of sound funny. I almost thought it was someone else."

"Who else would it be? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Right.....so what's my name again?" said the man on the other end.

Jared hung up the phone and stepped away from the phone booth. He looked in the back and could see a pipe going into the phone booth. He had to assume that's where the wires went. It just seemed so odd to have a working phone booth out here, in the middle of nowhere.

Jared wondered how you bet on a World Series that happened thirty-six years ago. He also wondered what was going to happen tomorrow morning at eight o'clock? It had to be a drug deal. Why else would anyone be doing it out here? He knew he had to get out of here, especially since the man on the other end was onto him. Things were going from bad to worse. Jared figured he used the payphone cause there was no cell reception out here. Still, the whole call was weird. Jared only knew about the series because his Dad was a die-hard Mets fan. His father was originally from Long Island. His father bet a thousand dollars of the family's money on the series and made a pretty good percentage on it.

He had to wonder if the gambling habit was genetic. It would certainly explain an awful lot.

He was awoken hours later by the phone ringing. He had been in and out of consciousness for the past few hours. As hot as it was during the day, at night, it was pretty chilly. He walked around in front to the phone and answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, can you get my husband, please? Tell him it's his wife," she said angrily.

"Who do you want me to get?"

"Don, the idiot that owns that gas station out there. Tell him it's Donna. He better not be with that whore again."

"Lady.....there's nobody here. Nobody's lived in here in years."

"Look, whoever you are. I know he's there. If he's with that skank again, I'll kill him. Just go and get him. I should have just driven out there myself."

"Ma'am, there isn't anyone living here. I'm not lying to you. I would find Don if he were here, but he isn't."

"Who are you? You sound like a nice young man. How did you get stuck in that dump?"

"Poor decisions, I guess."

"Eh, you and me both kid. If I had the last ten years to do over, believe me, I never would have looked twice at that chump," said Donna.

"So, where is he?" she continued.

"Donna. This is a ghost town. No one has lived here in years. I only wandered into town this afternoon cause I was out of gas."

"That's how we ended up there too. Funny how that works. What's your name?"

"Jared."

"Well, Jared, I was out there four or five days ago and I assure you, Don and his buddies were very much there. So, please cut the crap and go and find him for me. I know this is none of your business, but if I have to get in my car and drive out there from Victorville, I think I might end up beating him to death. You don't want that to happen, now do you?"

"Donna, may I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"Donna, what year is it?"

"Huh?"

"Just tell me what year we are in if you don't mind."

"Well, my calendar says April 4th, 1958. Sound about right to you?"

"Donna. It's June 3rd, 2022," said Jared softly, as if he were struggling for breath.

There was a pause on the other end. Each one hoping the other would speak first.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"Doing what?"

"Being an idiot. Did Don put you up to this?"

"Donna, I'm not lying to you."

"I'll be out there in a few hours, kid. If Don is there with his little whore, I'm going to shoot the both of them, then I'm going to come looking for you, got it?"

"Your husband has probably been dead for decades.....and so have you. How are you going to shoot me?" asked Jared.

Donna hung up the phone. Jared slowly put the receiver down. He was trembling now. He stepped out of the phone booth and looked at it. Was it real? Was the phone booth some kind of time machine?

Was he just imagining all this? Was someone playing a joke on him?

He stepped back and looked at the old phone booth. If this wasn't some kind of practical joke, then this phone booth was very, very unique.

Like, one in a billion unique.

Jared was intrigued, but not completely sold. This phone booth was some sort of a time machine, with the ability to receive calls made in decades past.....and perhaps in future years as well. The possibilities were endless. Then, it hit him.....like a punch in the face.

What if I could make some money with this thing? Like, real money.....like, millions?

Jared sat down on a pile of junk and began to think. All he had to do was get out of here, then dial the number on the phone and wait for his past self to pick up. It sounded absurd, but that's exactly what was happening. He could tell his past self the winning lottery numbers, or winners of races. All he had to do was get right once and the rest wouldn't matter. He wrote down the number on his arm and hand. He said it out loud at least a hundred times. He felt better than he had in years. He now had something to look forward to every morning. He had no idea how the phone booth worked. He knew he had to stick around longer and try to figure out any patterns he could with the calls. He also wanted to get a call from the future, even if it were only one day. Just to know it was possible. He also knew he had some difficult decisions ahead. He had to protect his golden goose here at all costs. He couldn't have someone just stumbling in here and learning the big secret. There was just so much to do.....

and so little time to do it in.

He got one other call that night. A teenage girl from Los Angeles from the year 1979. She said she just liked to dial random numbers and see who picked up. If only she knew. Jared tried to keep her on the line for as long as possible, but it was only for a few minutes. She said she had never dialed this number before. He didn't want her to think this was anything but a regular phone call. He figured his best bet was just to have her think he was a creep and never dial the number again, so he asked her if they could meet for sex. She laughed and hung up on him. That was fine. He didn't want her calling this number again.

He knew he had to make a run out to civilization. He figured he would walk out to the highway in the darkness, while it's cool, then hitch hike or walk another ten miles down the highway to that gas station he had passed. He just had to hope and pray that he could catch a ride with someone. Otherwise, he was going to be in for a few very uncomfortable days out here. He figured he would buy a gas can and some gas. He had exactly 94 dollars to his name. He was going to have to make it count. He hated leaving the booth, but he had no choice. This was do or die time.

He filled up his cup, then another small one, and carried them down the road. It was ten o'clock at night and the air had cooled to the point where he could at least walk a hundred feet, without worrying about heat stroke. He walked and walked for hours until he saw the headlights of the traffic on I-40. He was only at the edge of the road for about ten minutes when a truck stopped and picked him up. Jared could have kissed the man he was so thankful.

He dropped him off at the gas station which was closed. It wouldn't open back up for a few hours. The driver was kind enough to give Jared a bottle of water, which he downed immediately. He had been walking for over seven hours. He was also very hungry. He wasn't even tired. He was still far too wired to even think about sleep. There would be time for that later. Right now, he had to get his ducks in a row.

He had to wait two agonizingly long hours for the station to open. He bought as much water and snacks as he could carry. The girl working behind the counter actually gave him an old backpack that had been thrown away. Jared knew his luck was finally beginning to change.

He now had the unenviable task of getting back to Dafney. He knew there was no way he was going to make it in this heat. He would have to wait until sundown to begin walking back.

Jared stopped and helped an elderly couple change their tire. He also replaced their radiator hose. Once upon a time, he wanted to become a mechanic and had gone to school to learn the trade. That was another lifetime ago. They were so grateful, that they drove him back to the Dafney turn-off. He didn't want to run the risk of exposing the phone booth to anyone, even if that meant walking for hours in the summer heat. At least this time, he had enough liquid to keep him hydrated. Lucky for him, it was cloudy that afternoon and the sun was off his back.

It was nearly six o'clock by the time he got back to Dafney. He had gone through an entire gallon of water. He was putting his supplies in his car when he heard the phone ring. He ran over and picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, what's up?"

"Not much, how bout you?"

"Not much here. I got the compressor. It wasn't cheap. It's the last one."

"Cool."

"Yeah, I can deliver it today if you want."

"Um.....not today. Can you do it tomorrow?"

"No, I got to take the wife to her sisters. It's only going to take a few hours for me to get down there."

"I know, I'm just kind of busy today. With all this bullshit going on," said Jared

"Tell me about it. I can't believe how bad things are getting. I was in the grocery store the other day and half the damn shelves were empty. It's just insane."

"I know what you mean. Hey, can you send me a screenshot of the compressor?"

"Sure. I already did."

"I know, I didn't get it," he said. Jared knew this was his only chance. He had to for it.

"Are you alright, you sound different."

"I'm fine. My damn allergies are acting up. Hey, what's today's date?"

"Sept 5th.....just two months to go until we can Biden out of office. My entire block is going to celebrate."

Jared lost his breath. This was exactly what he had been waiting for.

"I lost your number. I'm glad I remembered it." said the caller.

"Okay, man. I gotta go. I got a customer. I'll text you later."

"Okay. I'll be here," he said and hung up.

Jared walked out of the booth and felt like dancing. The booth received calls from the future as well. He had a real-life money tree in his backyard.....*and he would fight like hell to keep it.*

He woke up the next morning sore as hell. He lit up a smoke and rolled off his make-shift bed. He looked out the windowless room and saw an RV/camper parked outside. He was now wide awake and in a controlled panic. The truck pulling the camper was new and very expensive. These people obviously had money. The last thing they would want is trouble. Jared figured he'd just act a little *off-kilter* and these people would quickly take off. They could call the cops. that's exactly what these rich fuckers usually do at the first sight of trouble. Let someone else do the dirty work so they can go about their happy, carefree lives. He had to handle this situation carefully. He also had to pray the phone didn't ring. He figured it would be best simply to act as if this was his property and they were trespassing. Something rich people could relate to. He put on his best game face and calmly walked outside. He walked right up to a middle-aged woman who was on her phone. She stopped mid-sentence in her conversation.

"Someone's here. I'll call you back," she said.

"Hi," said Jared.

"Hi," she said back nervously.

"You are aware this is private property?" said Jared.

"It is? I thought it was BLM property?" she replied.

"No, we own forty acres right here. BLM property starts outside of town. This is private property. I'd like you to leave."

"You own this town?" she asked.

"My great uncle Don owned it. He had a gas station right over there. He owned several other buildings."

"So, he didn't own the whole town, just some properties in the town?"

"Well, yes."

"So then, you don't own the whole town, just some buildings in the town and lots, correct?" she asked.

"I want you to leave," said Jared

"Well, we can't. Our truck broke down. We are waiting for our son to come out with his truck and take us back to San Diego."

There wasn't much Jared could do. If they called the cops, things could get very messy. He knew his only real option was to wait for the son to come and get them.....as uncomfortable as that made him.

"Look, we aren't going to bother you. There's not much we can do until our son gets here," she said.

"I have some very important business on that payphone over there. I would greatly appreciate it if you could stay the hell off it," he said angrily.

"Sure.....not a problem," she said and went back into the camper.

He didn't know what to do next. The woman said *our* son.....as if her husband was there with her. Maybe there was someone else in the camper. That would certainly complicate matters. He figured he could handle just her, but a husband could be a problem. Jared weighed a hundred and seventy pounds soaking wet. He was not physically intimidating. Hopefully, they would just stay in the camper until their son arrived, cause if they didn't.....*things could get very ugly, very quickly.*

Jared had no idea just how ugly they would get.

The husband wasted no time in trying to rectify the situation. He quickly walked over to Jared and demanded some answers.

"Look, we've been coming out here for years and never had a problem. What gives?"

"I'm just asking that you respect my privacy and the law, that's all," replied Jared.

"If you can show me some kind of documentation that you own property here, I'll believe you, until then, you're a trespasser, just like us," he said and stormed off.

Jared didn't care whether they believed him or not, so long as they stayed away from the phone. They may have seen his car, they may not have. He took the license plate off just in case. With today's technology, there was no way of hiding or remaining anonymous. They could easily check the property records for the county and quickly see that he was not a property owner. He reached into his glove compartment and took out his snub nose 38. He always kept it loaded. In his line of work, you never knew when you might need it.

He immediately realized that he had screwed up by taking this approach. That trailer was most likely stocked with food and water, which he had almost none. He did not want to go back to

drinking rusty groundwater. He knew he should try and take another approach. Maybe try and be a little nicer. They might even offer him a cold drink.

He walked over to the camper and knocked on the door. The husband opened the trailer door.

"Look, I'm sorry. I've had a lot of trouble out here with unwanted visitors. The last one got pretty ugly. I can see you're nice, respectable people. I should have been a little more understanding." he said.

That seemed to relax the mood somewhat, but not completely.

"Well, do you want to come in?" he asked.

"Wait.....where's your wife?"

"She said she was going for a walk. We um.....we haven't been getting along lately. I told her to just stay put, but you women.....last thing they want to do is listen to their husbands." he said.

Jared ran around the building to the phone booth. Much to his horror, he saw the woman in the phone booth.....*talking on the phone.*

He ran over to her and pulled the receiver out of her hands.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I told you not to use that phone!"

"Oh Jesus, do you own the phone too?"

"What did he say?"

"What did who say?"

"The person on the other end?"

"Nothing.....it was weird. Like I was talking to someone thirty years ago. They didn't even know what a cell phone was."

Jared took a step back. He knew what he had to do, as unpleasant as it would be. There was no turning back now. If he didn't take care of them, the genie could be let out of the bottle."

"Yeah....look, I'm sorry. You're right, I don't own the phone, I just have some very important business to take care of and I'm expecting a very important call. Please stay off the phone." he said nervously.

The woman didn't seem to know what to make of him. She went from being angry and annoyed to worried. The look on her face said enough.

They walked back to the trailer. Jared had to prepare himself mentally for what he was about to do. The ends justified the means. He kept telling himself that over and over as they walked back to the trailer.

Her husband was waiting for them. He began to walk over towards them. Jared knew it was now or never. They all stopped. It was the woman who screamed first. Jared put a round right into her face. He then fired two rounds into her husband's chest. The woman had half her face blown off but was still screaming on the ground. Jared put the remaining two rounds into her body. In the span of ten seconds, he had taken two human lives.

As in permanently removed from society.

He sat down on a small bench next to the dead bodies. He couldn't believe what he had done. As bad as things had gotten for him over the years, he never thought he would sink this low. That's what getting older had become.....*sinking to new lows with each passing year.*

He put the bodies one by one into an old wheelbarrow and carted them into the desert. He had found an old mine shaft entrance into the rock. He carried the bodies inside and threw them down the shaft. He knew it would be very risky to get inside the truck. His DNA would be all over it. He was as good as dead if he were caught. Leaving this expensive rig out in the open for all to see was not an option either. He had searched their pants and wallets before throwing their bodies down the shaft. He got two hundred dollars and the truck keys. He drove the truck behind some old buildings and parked it inside.

Jared had just eaten a giant shit sandwich without the bread.

It was not completely hidden, but not completely visible either. He knew he had to get out of here, but he still had one loose end to tie up.

He had to wait for their son to arrive. He knew he was on borrowed time. He only found one cell phone and threw it down the shaft as well. They could have taken a photo of his license plate before he removed it and a picture of his car. It was an old I-ROC Camaro. Not too many of them left around. It certainly wouldn't be hard to track down. He went back to his car and reloaded. All he could do now was sit and wait. Hopefully, no one else would show up between now and then. He would have to play it a little cooler next time, with no more dead bodies.

Jared had done the unthinkable, and committed the worst crime imaginable, simply because he did not want to be poor anymore, at least in some other alternate reality. The ends, in this case, did justify the means. That phone booth had to be protected.....at all costs. It was like he was sitting on the biggest little secret in the world.

The son arrived a few hours later. Jared wasted no time. He simply waved him over and when he was close, he shot him three times. The last shot killed him. He scooped up his body and dumped it with the rest of the family in the old mine shaft. His arms were sore. This had been one hell of a workout and one hell of a day in general. He still had no idea how he was going to get rid of the vehicles. That would have to wait until later. Right now, he had to plan out his future. He figured he'd start small, he wouldn't want to draw too much attention to himself. Maybe win the lottery to give him a good base. Maybe buy a real house. Then he'd hit the casinos and clean

them out. He wanted to get so good none of them would take his bets. To know you've beaten the best is a feeling quite unlike any other. Today had been brutal, but it would all be worth it in the end. He just had to figure out the phone booth's system. It was too random to be random. There had to be a way. He just needed a little time and time was the one thing he did not have.

He figured he'd wait until nightfall to move the vehicles. Till then he wanted to hang around the phone booth. Maybe he could get some information from his future he could use right now. Even though his plan would only work for Jared in the past, it was still him, or at least some version of him.

At least some version of himself would know what it feels like to win big and to be on top.

The call came in a few minutes later. Jared had to wipe the sweat off his forehead. It was so goddamn hot out here, he was amazed anyone could live in it.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hi? Is my dad out there? He lives in a little trailer out there?" the man said nervously.

"Um, nope. there's no trailer here."

"Come on man, I just talked to him last night on this phone, I know he's there."

"Well, he's not here now, I'm sorry."

"Jesus Christ.....it's really happening.....it's really fucking happening?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Aren't you watching the news? Oh, Jesus, we just lost another base. They just hit Nellis. They nuked Nellis!"

"Whoa, whoa, what the hell are you talking about?" asked Jared

"World War Three! It's happening right now. Oh, my God. The Russian and chink subs are killing us. We keep losing one base right after the next.....oh Jesus. Jesus, they just hit Washington! Look, man, tell my dad I love him and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for everything. I hope he can forgive me."

"What's the date?"

"Huh?"

"The goddamn date! WHAT'S TODAY'S DATE? TELL ME THE DATE!" screamed Jared into the phone.

"It's.....it's.....oh God, what is that? Oh God.....of God....." he said as the line went dead.

Jared hung up. He slumped down into the phone booth. He never got the date. He knew it was going to happen, but when?

There had to be a way out of this. Not all places would get destroyed. There would be survivors. They would want to gamble. Everyone would probably just want to have a good time and forget about this war business. Yeah, this wasn't the end. Not a chance. A small setback, perhaps, but winners just don't give up, no sir.

Jared was going to know what it felt like to win big.....just for once in his life.