

WENDYVILLE

John Boston

They hadn't passed another car in almost half an hour.....and this was a busy highway in Queensland. John O'Brien thought he knew God's country but this was on an entirely different level. It was much different than America, where you could just drive for half an hour and you were bound to find something. No, this was rural Queensland Australia.....*the middle of freaking nowhere*. Nothing around for hundreds of miles. No gas stations, no hospitals, no nothing. You got into trouble out here, you may as well just kiss your ass goodbye. He bought two gas cans in Charleville and filled them up just in case. They were on their way to Ayer's Rock, which was still two days away. That's how big and empty Australia is. It was the four of them, John, his wife Karen and the *youngins*.....Josh and Kendra. Only two years apart but in terms of maturity, they may as well be twenty years apart. He knew they were going to be doing a lot of driving and could have rented a more fuel-friendly car, but that meant smaller and more cramped as well. He chose a mid-size SUV. A lot more comfortable but also much thirstier at the pump. They had only been driving for two hours and they needed to fill up again. Birdsville was still a few hours away. Cell service was spotty and several road signs warned of no cell service for hundreds of miles. He spotted the sign for Wendyville and slowed down. He was relieved to see there was gas available. He pulled over and put the car in park.

"Well.....how bout it? We need gas."

"Dad, everyone in Charleville told us to stay on the highway and not to get off. We could disappear out here and no one would even know where to look for us."

"Ken, just because it's the middle of nowhere doesn't mean it's dangerous," he replied.

"Doesn't mean it's safe either." she shot back.

"We don't want to run out of gas kids. We'll just fill up and be back on the road in ten minutes," said Karen.

John could sense the tension coming from both of his children. They had made it abundantly clear they didn't want to come on this trip, they were both busy trying to live their best lives and couldn't be bothered to be a whole family again. He and Karen knew this would be the last time they spent any real-time together as a family. Josh was leaving for college as soon as they got back home and Kendra was taking a job in Los Angeles, where she had wanted to live ever since she was a child. They had been agreeable so far but, the longer the trip wore on, the worse their attitudes became. John and Karen thought Australia was a paradise. Hundreds of miles of empty beaches with no houses and no people. You could have the entire beach to yourself. White sands and huge waves.

Must be what California looked like over a hundred years ago, before people ruined it.

The kids however were less than impressed. They constantly bitched about how far everything was and how they had to drive for days just to get anywhere. They loved Sydney. Josh had gone surfing for the first time in his life.....and presumably his last.

"Mom's right. Just a quick fill-up, then we're out of there. We don't want to run out of gas out here." said John.

"You got two full gas cans," said Kendra.

"Honey, this thing sucks down gas like it's water on a hundred-degree day."

She just rolled her eyes. Neither of them had cell service and were being forced to interact with one another like actually talking to one another and have real conversations. John quickly discovered that people his kid's age don't know how to have real conversations. Most of their conversations revolved around sex and technology.

He pulled off onto the exit for Wendyville. The sign looked like it had been there for ages. Hopefully, there was gas there. It was ten miles off the highway.

"Dad, let me see if I can get a signal so I can send a text back to grandpa and let him know where we are," said Kendra.

"Good luck, I haven't had service in almost an hour," said Josh.

The paved road turned into a gravel road. It was gravel but was still well maintained. They passed a sign that read: WENDYVILLE FIVE MILES with an arrow pointing the way.

He could sense that everyone in the family had tensed up just a bit. It didn't get any better when they passed by two men in these strange-looking white suits wearing sunglasses. He slowed down and waved at the men who just stood motionless. Josh looked back and saw one of the men talking into a handheld radio.

"Dad, that guy just talked into his radio. That was weird."

"Guys.....relax. This is a mining town. There are miners here. They were just wearing HAZMAT suits." said John.

"Those guys were just plain weird," said Karen.

John saw the town up ahead. Much to his surprise, it was a very well-kept, very typical rural Australian town, with giant palm trees lining the middle of the street.

"Cute little town," he said.

He drove past several old, classic cars and pick-up trucks parked on the side of the street. He passed the post office and a small general store. He found the gas station. It looked like it was fifty years old. The pumps looked like something you'd find in a museum. He pulled the Toyota

up to the pump. He was surprised to see the pump had no place to swipe a card. A man came out a minute. He stopped and looked at the Toyota. It was as if he had never seen one before. He walked over and John rolled down the window.

"Quite a sled you got here mate." said the man with a heavy Australian accent.

"Just a rental."

"You can rent something like this?"

"Yeah, only fifty dollars a day, plus insurance."

"Guess things are much different in the cities. Can I fill her up for ya?"

"Please."

John turned off the ignition. The man put fifteen gallons in and hung the nozzle back on the pump.

"Alright.....fifteen gallons at a dollar a gallon.....comes to fifteen dollars by my math."

"Fifteen dollars?" said John taken aback.

"Damn Arabs. The price went up by almost fifty cents over the last few months. I should have told you before, my fault." said the attendant.

John reached into his pocket and gave the man 20 Australian dollars. He looked at the money and just rolled his eyes.

"Mate.....come on. I might be a bit thick but I'm not stupid."

"What are you talking about."

"This isn't a real dollar," he said holding it up.

"Of course it is. We just got it in Charleville," said Karen.

"Look, I don't know if this is some kind of a joke or not but, I am going to need some real money to pay for this gas," he said with his smile gone.

"What on Earth is wrong with this money?" asked John

"Well, for starters, it says SERIES 2016," he said pointing to the serial number on the bill.

"So?"

"Mate....2016 hasn't happened yet," he said

No one in the car said a word. This guy was completely serious.

"What the hell do you mean, it's five years old."

"Look. Are you going to give me some real money, or do I have to call the constable?"

"Can I pay with a credit card?" said John, holding up the credit card.

The man took the card and looked at it. We don't have a credit machine. it's cash only here."

"That's all we've got."

"Wait here. Don't bother trying to take off. It's a hundred miles of desert out there, you won't get very far." said the man as he ran back into his office.

"This is unbelievable."

"Told you we never should have gotten off the highway," said Kendra

"Ken, will you shut up, you're not helping anything." barked Karen.

"We're going to jail out here. Dad, this is not good. I think we should run for it." said Josh.

"We haven't done anything wrong, why on Earth would we run, that's only going to make us look guilty," said John.

"I don't like this town. Everything here looks so old. Like time just stood still for the past fifty years." said Josh.

"Lots of these rural towns look like this. Progress is slow out here. Companies don't want to invest a ton of money in these little places if they aren't ever going to make it back."

"John.....have you even seen a car that looks new?" All of these cars and trucks look like they should be in a museum?" said Karen.

"I say Mate.....ain't I see you around here before?"

"I've never been to this town before in my life," said John, even more surprised.

"Yeah.....you work for the mine. That daughter of yours looks familiar as well," he said grinning.

"Oh God.....ewww," said Kendra.

"We're from New Jersey. This is the first time we've been to this town."

John saw the police car pull into the gas station. A man about his own age stepped out. He looked over at John, then at the attendant."

"Wally.....what seems to be the trouble here?"

"I just want them to pay for the gas. They gave me this," said Wally and handed him the 20 dollar bill.

"The hell is this?"

"That's what I said. Isn't that the same guy from the mine?" asked Wally.

"Yeah, I reckon it is.....John is his name I believe. Go ahead and charge it to the mine for right now. I'll talk with them."

Morton walked over to the car. He stopped and looked at the new Land Cruiser.

"Quite a vehicle you got there, John."

"How the hell do you know my name?"

"John.....can we talk for a moment? Just you and I?"

John stepped out of the car and they both walked over to the gas pumps. Morton looked at Wally, who quickly got the picture and walked back inside.

"John.....what are you doing?"

"How do you know my name?"

"What do you mean, how do I know your name? I know you, that's how I know your name."

"We've never met before in my life."

"John, you and the mine supervisor....we all had lunch last month after the big flood remember? We asked the mine to borrow the loader to help us clean up the town?"

"What's your name?" asked John

"Morton Hackney.....Senior Sergeant Morton Hackney. Look, John, if this is some kind of joke, I have to ask you to stop. It's kind of lost its luster."

"Mr. Hackney, my name is John Obrien. My family and I are from New Jersey. Up until two weeks ago, we had never set foot in Australia in our lives. Do you want to see our passports?"

"Yes, please."

John walked over to the Toyota and grabbed their passports. He handed them over to Morton.

"John.....this date.....it says April 18th, 2021. If you're going to forge them, you have to use the correct date."

"So, what is today's date then Morton?"

"May 8th.....1974," Morton said, handing him back the passports.

John looked over at his family. He walked over to the car.

"Tell them today's date please Morton."

"What is today's date.....if I may ask?" asked Morton.

"May 8th 2021.....why?" said Kendra holding up her phone.

Morton reached into the car and grabbed the phone. He looked at it as if he had never seen a smartphone before.....*or any type of phone that wasn't connected to a cord.*

"Wally?" shouted Morton.

Wally came running over. Morton handed him the phone.

"You ever seen something like this before?" asked Morton.

"The hell is it?"

Wally began to play with the buttons and couldn't believe what he was holding. He nearly dropped it he was so amazed.

"Sweet Lord.....what is this thing?"

"Can I have my phone back please?" asked Kendra.

"This is a phone? Like you can make calls on this?" asked Morton.

"Morton.....my family and I would like to be on our way."

"John.....I don't know what's going on here but, I think you and your family might need some kind of help. If you're in trouble, at least let me try and help." said Morton.

"I appreciate the offer Morton but, we're fine. All we need is gas. I'd like to get back on the highway and get the hell out of here if you don't mind?"

"I could arrest you for counterfeiting. That is a pretty serious crime here in Australia."

"That 20 dollar bill would be accepted anywhere else in Australia without question. I am not a criminal and if I was going to pass a counterfeit bill, don't you think I would have used the correct date?"

"I wouldn't know John, I'm not a criminal either. Look, let's call the mine superintendent. I'd feel a lot better before letting you go."

"If you aren't going to arrest us, then let us go."

"John....you come into town in a car that looks like something I've never seen before, you pass fake money and you think it's almost fifty years into the future, now what the hell am I supposed to think?" asked Morton.

John knew he had to play this one carefully. One wrong move and he could be stuck in this whacko town.

Cause things were definitely getting weirder by the minute here in ol Wendyville. He had to make it sound believable.

He motioned to Morton and leaned into him.

"The superintendent will explain everything. You guys weren't supposed to see this new SUV. I took the family out in it. I thought they would never find out but we ran out of gas. I just wanted to impress them. It was stupid. Look, Morton, I could lose my job if they find out about this.....please?"

"What the hell is the deal with this fake money?"

"It's all part of the promotion. Cars from the future, phones from the future, money from the future, you know. Please.....you arrest me and I'm done.....we're all done. We like it here, we don't want to get kicked out of the country."

"You could have just told me that."

"I'm sorry. I panicked. I got to get this thing back to Toyota before tomorrow morning. Please don't say anything."

"Yeah.....just.....just get it back to where it belongs," said Morton.

"Thanks, man, we owe you one big time. I'll fill you as soon as we get back," said John, hopping back into the car.

"What did you tell him?" asked Karen.

"Let's just get out of here," said John.

He waved to Morton and Wally who were just staring at them. John drove slowly until he reached the outskirts of the little town, then he floored it. He slowed down as he saw several men dressed in white suits and wearing sunglasses. They almost seemed to be blocking the road.

"Dad.....whatever you, don't stop," said Kendra.

"You want me to hit them?"

"If that's what it takes."

The men moved at the last second and narrowly avoided getting run over. John sped up until the gravel road turned back into a paved road. He jammed on the brakes and the SUV slid until it reached the edge of the highway. He looked to the left and then to the right.

"What? What are you looking for?" yelled Karen.

"The sign."

"What sign?"

"The sign for the turn to Wendyville we saw. It's gone."

"Jesus, he's right," said Kendra.

"Floor it dad!" said Josh.

John did just that. They looked back over their shoulder. Even the turnoff looked different.

"There was that big gas station about an hour outside Charleville. Let's head back there."

"That was the creepiest shit ever. Next time, we don't leave the highway," said Kendra.

"Don't worry Ken, I won't," said John.

He had the gas pedal floored. He didn't know where he was headed but, the next time he entered Wendyville, he would have plenty of back up. No way was he going out there alone again.

He pulled into a truck stop outside of Charleville and filled up. The family went inside and got some drinks and snacks. He decided it was time for a family meeting of sorts. Attendance was mandatory.

"Okay....so, what do we do now?" asked John between bites of his sandwich.

"Dad.....let's just stick to the more populated areas along the coast. We can go to Cairns. It's only like a two day drive from here. It's like the Australian Miami," said Kendra.

"Yeah.....I'm thinking you might be right."

"The WhitSunday Islands Park is only a day's drive from here. I watched videos on it before we left, it looks amazing," said Karen.

"At least we won't get kidnapped by weirdos. I didn't even see another car on the road for like fifteen minutes.....*and this is supposed to be a busy highway in Australia,*" said Josh.

"I guess we only have one big question left."

"What's that?"

"Do we go to the cops and tell them what we saw? Or just keep on driving and pretend we never saw it," said John.

"Let's just pretend we never saw that place," said Josh

"I agree with Josh.....for once. Won't do any good to go to the cops anyway. It's not like it's against the law to pretend your living in 1974." said Kendra.

"No.....but, I suspect there's a little more than just pretending going on in that town. They were all hiding something, I just don't know what. I'd hate to think there were people being held there against their will and we chose not to do anything about it."

"It's not our problem dad," said Kendra.

"Maybe we just place an anonymous phone call or something? Is that even possible nowadays?" added Karen.

"I would hate to think we could have stopped something horrible and we chose to just let it continue," said John.

"It's your call dad but, I'm perfectly fine with just letting it go."

John looked over at his wife. She was thinking much the same thing he was but, neither of them wanted to deal with the wrath of Kendra if things continued to go even further downhill. John loved his daughter but at the same time.....*he really couldn't stand her*. She was rude, selfish, and about as loyal as a hooker on payday.....*and she was his own flesh and blood*. He knew just walking away was the easy thing to do.....maybe even the smart thing to do but, it just wasn't the right thing to do. The police should be notified. If he were trapped in that town, he would want someone to call the police.

"I might be making a mistake but, I think it's one mistake worth making. Something about that town was just.....*wrong*," he said, sipping his soda.

"How did they know who we were? That's the part I don't understand?" said Josh.

"I don't understand either. They mistook us for some other family named O'Brien that worked at the mine."

"Dad, that cop recognized you. He really thought we lived in that town," said Kendra.

"Nothing about that town made any sense. It wasn't just odd, it was something else.....and that something else is why I think we should at least make a phone call to the police."

"Yeah, maybe Dad's right."

"Maybe we just took a bite of a giant shit sandwich too," said Kendra.

"Well, here goes nothing," said John as he walked back inside the store.

They all watched him at the counter talking to the girls who were working there. One of the girls walked away and made a call on the phone.

"We should have just gotten out of here. He's only going to make everything worse."

"Kendra, could you please be a little more supportive? I mean it's like we're in some third-world country where people just disappear and are never heard from again. They have laws in Australia. People respect the police. You need a degree to become a cop in this country." said Karen.

"Right mom," said Karen, closing her eyes and pulling her baseball cap over her face.

Half an hour later two constables from the Queensland Police Service, Constables O'Neil, and Henry showed up at the petrol station to interview the family. They were polite and professional. Kendra thought Constable O'Neil was gorgeous.

"So.....you say you went to Wendyville and there's a town there?" asked Constable Henry.

"Yes.....they think it's like May 1974. I know it sounds ridiculous but it's true. They wouldn't take our money because they thought the year 2016 hadn't happened yet."

The two constables looked at one another and continued taking notes.

"I'm sorry, just to be clear.....you say there's a town in Wendyville? Not the remains of a town but, an actual town and people living in it?" asked Henry.

"Yes," said Karen.

"Alright then, give us just a moment here," said Henry as he and O'Neil walked back to their car. They were both on their phones and came back a few minutes later.

"Well, alright then, let's go and have a look. We'll meet some more officers out there," said O'Neil.

"Fine," said John.

Little was said on the drive back out to Wendyville. Kendra was clearly upset but she wisely chose to keep her opinions to herself. She didn't want to be on this vacation anyway. She would have been more than happy just staying at home and getting ready for the big move out to LA. Why they just couldn't stay in someplace cool like Melbourne or Sydney, she had no idea. Dad was just getting crazier and crazier with each passing day. Going back to this place was about the final straw.

She should be flirting with cute Australian boys.....not in a car with her family in the middle of nowhere. That's just not how Kendra O'Brien flies.

Maybe she should just pull Josh aside and ask him if he would join her back in civilization. The two of them would be much louder than just her alone. They would at least have to compromise if they thought Josh was going to join her. That would get their attention.

"Dad....where's the sign?" asked Josh.

"Good question. Maybe it's up ahead."

They slowed down as they were met by another deputy from the Queensland Police. He had his car parked to where the Wendyville turnoff sign was only a few hours ago.

"Did someone take the sign down?" asked Karen.

John pulled up next to the officer.

"There was a sign right here for Wendyville."

"Sorry mate, that sign fell down ages ago, back when I was just a kid." said the officer.

The two police cars went in first and John followed. None of them even had their bar lights on. This clearly was not an emergency according to the Queensland National Police.

When they came upon the remains of the town, John had to stop the car and jump out. None of this made any sense.

Where the hell did the town go?

"Dad.....where's the town? Did we take a wrong turn or something?" asked Josh.

"No.....no, this is the right road, I just don't know where the town went."

"Dad.....where's the town?" asked Kendra, almost shaking.

Officer Henry and O'Neil walked over to the family. No one said anything at first. John kind of knew what was coming.

"As you can clearly see Mr. O'Brien.....there is no town out here," said Constable O'Neil.

"Yeah.....I can see that."

"Are you satisfied? Do you want to look around some more?" asked O'Neil.

"Dad.....look. Here's the gas station.....or what's left of it," said Josh.

"That's right where that little store was. I remember seeing their sign and thinking their prices seemed very low," said Karen.

"Well, there was a small town here, back in the '70s. After the disaster, it just pretty much disappeared after the mine closed down. MY dad was just a teenager when it happened. Horrible

explosion in the silver mine. Killed almost twenty workers. The lucky ones were working near the surface and we were able to get out." said Henry

"Look.....Mr. O'Brien.....I don't know what you saw out here but, you can clearly see there's no one out here now. We have a couple of native fellows that look after the place. Once in a while, they catch gypsies and bums in the town. There hasn't been anyone living out here in almost thirty years. I'm going to label this one *case closed*." said O'Neil.

"It's getting late. We don't want to be out here in the dark," said Henry.

"I'm sorry I wasted your time," said John

The family followed the constables back onto the main highway. They kept up with them for several miles, then began to back off. They found a motel just outside of Charleville and decided to call it a night.

Everyone was exhausted. Josh and Kendra got their own room. They didn't even bother to say good night. Josh was busy trying to get updates about his fantasy football team and Kendra was posting on FaceBook about the *weirdest fucking thing ever* that happened to their family today. John sat down on the bed and looked at Karen. She was exhausted as well. She loved her husband but she loved herself too. She knew he was not going to just let it go, even though he should.....for the sake of the rest of the O'Brien clan.

"What the hell happened out there today?" asked John as he lay next to her.

"I think we visited a real-life ghost town. Either that or we somehow went back in time to the year 1974. Take your pick."

"We really were back in that town in 1974. Everything was real. We can't all be hallucinating about the same thing."

"There are lots of strange things that have happened over the years in this country. Strange disappearances. A whole school bus went missing. John, I think we should just do what Kendra wants. Maybe going back to the big cities might be the best plan. The last thing I want to do is deal with her attitude for the next week. She seemed to like Sydney. So did Josh."

"Yeah but, that's just the problem. Sydney is no different than New York or LA. They're all the same. I want the kids to see something different. Something they aren't normally going to see in their daily lives. They have the rest of their lives to see the big city. Maybe the WhitSunday Islands Park might be a good idea.....or maybe Frasier Island. It looks beautiful there."

"I don't know. Ken seems to have her heart set on going back to the city and doing the same things she does back home. I thought this vacation would be a new start for us. Guess I was being kind of naïve."

"Honey. I did suggest a few times that we leave at home and just take Josh."

"I know, I just didn't want her to think we were excluding her."

"That's exactly what we were doing. John, you know what a royal pain in the ass she can be when she doesn't get her way. The fact that she can't get cell service is only pouring gas on the fire. She lives on her phone." said Karen, opening a beer from the fridge.

"I just wish she'd put the damn thing down for two seconds and notice the world around her."

"Her world is her phone. Her whole world is social media and posting selfies online. I think that's the only reason she came.....was to get some unique selfies her friends don't have."

"As soon as she hits LA, we'll never see her again. Maybe a call on the holidays.....our birthdays if we're lucky. I made a mistake bringing her. I just wanted us to feel like a family again for two seconds."

"We haven't been a family since she got her first smartphone," added Karen.

"It kind of sounds like you've given up on her."

"I just know my daughter. I'm only being realistic. This is who she is. She belongs to the internet, not to us."

John opened a beer from the fridge as well. He could barely finish it. Australian beer just didn't do it for him. He had tried Vegemite a few days ago with predictable results. It tasted like peanut butter gone wrong. He sat back on the bed and watched a little TV. It was either news or soccer and rugby. John knew nothing about either sport. He began to replay the events of today over and over again in his mind. It was as if he was now suddenly a part of some great mystery that had somehow pulled them all in.

"Did you get the impression that those cops knew more than they were telling us?" asked John

"Two of them didn't even look old enough to shave. The one older one was reserved, that doesn't mean he's hiding anything. I checked on the mining disaster as soon as we got service on our phones. Internet doesn't have much about it. May 8th, 1974. That was the same date that the constable gave us."

"I know. I can't stop thinking about that date. It means something. I just don't know what."

"They were totally unaware of the disaster that was about to hit that town that afternoon. No one is sure what happened. There was a big explosion in one of the mine shafts. No one is sure how it started. By the time rescue workers got to the bodies, they were all dead from burns or smoke inhalation."

"Jesus.....that's got to be a tough way to go."

"The government fined the mine owners a ton of money and the mine closed up about a year later. No reason to have a town out there if there isn't a mine," she said looking at her phone.

"Maybe that's it."

"What?"

"Somebody has to warn them. Someone needs to tell them what's going to happen that afternoon. They're all ghosts.....trapped in that day in that town forever." said John.

"How would you warn them? We were all out there.....there isn't a town there anymore."

"It will be there if it wants us to see it. It wanted us there that day. It almost didn't let us leave."

"You aren't thinking about going back there?"

"I just don't think we were chosen by accident. That town wanted us there today. It wanted us to become part of whatever is going on. I know you guys think I'm nuts but, someone has to help the people in that town.....they'll be trapped there forever."

"You want to rescue ghosts?"

"Does that sound ridiculous?"

"Kind of, yes," said Karen.

"Maybe it is, but I just can't leave it alone."

"John.....let's just walk away. Whatever is going on in that town, it doesn't involve us."

"It does now. It could have kept us there but, it let us leave.....why did it do that?"

"You want to go back there? I've got a very bad feeling that if you go back there, I'll never see you again," said Karen.

"It wants something from me."

"I've said my piece. You want to go back there, you can do it on your own. You aren't taking me or the kids." said Karen as she finished her beer.

"Final answer?" asked John

"Final answer. John.....this isn't funny. You go out there again.....you might not come back. Is that really what you want?" asked Karen

"It wants me to come back. It needs me for some reason. I'll be back by lunchtime. Then, we'll get out of here and go to Cairns."

"Promise?"

"Promise," he said.

He went next door to the kid's room. Josh was watching Rugby and Kendra was talking to one of her many suitors. She could tell by his look, he meant business. She hung up and sat down on the bed next to him.

"What's up?"

"I'm going back out there tomorrow. If it's still not there, I turn around, then we come back and head out to Cairns," he said.

"What if the town suddenly appears again?" asked Josh.

"Well....I'll try and find out who they are and what they want."

"Dad.....are you nuts? Let's just get in the car in the morning and drive out of here. Forget about that place."

"It's some kind of mystery and we are all involved."

"The only mystery is why we are still here," said Kendra.

"You want to just forget about the fact that our family was somehow magically transported back to the year 1974? You want to just pretend that never happened?" asked John.

"What difference does it make? We're not in 1974 now," said Kendra.

"We might be the only people on the planet who have ever gone back in time and you just want to pretend it never happened?" asked John

"What do you think you're going to find there? That town is creepy and weird. Just let it go. We can all look back on it and laugh years from now. It will be a really cool family secret but, that's all. Please, don't go back there."

"They could have kept us there if they wanted to. Why did they just let us leave?" asked Josh.

"I don't know son. I wish I did."

"So, you just want to go back there and what.....look around for clues or something?"

"Well yes, something like that."

"You might disappear. Why would you do that to us? Are you that selfish?"

"I just think we should try and solve this mystery.....*Kendra.....the people in that town want us to solve it!*"

"It's not our problem."

"That's what's wrong with this world today. That attitude."

"Here we go again," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Kendra.....there is more to life than social media and selfies. You've got to understand that," said John.

"What does that have to do with you going back there?"

"The world went to hell in a handbasket because everyone stopped caring and just looked the other way. No one wanted to get involved, or get their hands dirty or take a stand and lose their job or their house or their pension. Everyone just looked the other way while the whole country went to shit. We expected everyone but us to do what is right."

"Great dad. Have fun on your little adventure. If you don't come back, well.....I guess it's your fault." she said and went back to using her phone.

"Can I go with you dad?" asked Josh.

"No bud. I don't know what's going to happen out there tomorrow. I might not come back. I don't want you not to come back either."

"Dad, this is insane. Why are you doing this?" asked Josh with tears in his eyes.

"Cause someone has to set those people free. Their ghosts trapped in their little ghost world. Maybe if I can somehow warn them about the disaster in the mine that day.....I don't know. Maybe it will save their lives and they won't be stuck having to replay that horrible day over and over again for eternity."

"Well, good luck. I guess I won't try to change your mind then," he said

John went down to the lobby to get some ice and some sodas. As he passed by the front desk, he noticed an older gentleman. As soon as the man saw John, he ran out to meet him.

"Are you John O'Brien?" asked Carpenter.

"Maybe?"

"I'm Chief Inspector David Carpenter. You were the one who sent my deputies on that wild goose chase this morning?" he said, showing John his Queensland Police badge and ID.

"Yeah. Look, I'm sorry about that but, I'm not going to change my story. We all saw it. It was there and so were the people in the town."

"You told my officers that there was a constable in that town named Morton Hackney. Is that correct?"

"Yup."

"The man who was working at the gas station. His name was Wally?"

"That's what he told me."

"Morton Hackney and Wally Newman were both killed that day. The mine put out a general distress call and they both ran into the mine to try and help. Neither man ever came out. Their bodies were never recovered. They were just assumed to have been crushed when one of the tunnels collapsed."

John didn't say anything and wasn't quite sure of what to make of this.

"Mr. O'Brien. I like things to add up. I like it when they make a nice neat little case for us to solve and none of this is adding up. I just can't for the life of me figure out what you stand to gain by it. See, we've had several persons go missing in that area over the past five years. Two for sure we know stopped at Wendyville and were never seen or heard from again. Now, here you come and tell us a very hard-to-believe story about a town where everyone thinks it's 1974. See the problem we have here?"

"Not really."

"Families have gone missing out there. No trace of them is ever found again. The kind of stuff that makes your skin crawl if you know what I mean. I just don't want your family to go missing. I don't know what's going on in that town but, whatever it is, you'd be wise to avoid it."

"I'll certainly take it under consideration," said John, filling the ice bucket.

"I mean it, John. Be thankful you all got out of there alive. That's more than some could say." he said and opened the door to his police car.

"If you know something about what's really happening out there, I think you should share it with me," said John.

"Just crazy stories John. Please, forget about that place. Go up north. Cairns and the beaches are beautiful this time of year." said Carpenter as he closed his door.

John watched him drive away. He couldn't help but think that maybe everyone was right. Maybe he should just walk away. That old bastard knew a lot more than he was letting on. He just wanted to see if John was holding anything back.

Just like any good Chief Inspector would do in a situation like this. Keep your best cards hidden until it's time to call.

By the time John got back to his room, Karen was half asleep. He knew they needed to have a very real *heart-to-heart* talk but that would have to wait until the morning. His plan was to be gone by the time everyone woke up and back before they started to worry. He knew he was upsetting the family but his sense of curiosity was just overpowering at this point. He had to know what the hell was going on out there.

He slept in longer than he had wanted to. He rolled over and saw his wife was already in the bathroom. She came back in ready to go. Hair combed, teeth brushed, and looking like she meant business.

"The kids and I decided that if you are going out there, then we're all going. You aren't going out there alone," she said, putting on her lipstick.

"Karen, that's crazy."

"No, crazy is letting you go out there by yourself. We're a family, John. We live or die as a family. There's nothing out there anyway. We're just wasting the day but you seemed determined to see this thing out, so let's get going."

John brushed his teeth and got dressed quickly. He met the kids at the van. Kendra looked none too impressed. She hadn't gotten up this early in ages.

"This is a complete waste of time but, mom and I agreed, it's for the best," she said getting in the van.

John was back on the highway within minutes. He made sure he had extra gas with him. Kendra and Josh were busy on their phones, as was his wife. No one was even looking around at the unusual and beautiful scenery. The entire desert seemed to come alive after last night's thunderstorms. There were giant puddles everywhere. He knew he should just keep his mouth shut but, this was his vacation too. He just didn't understand how they could be staring at a screen instead of looking at the world around them. These kids had absolutely no attention span at all. They were turning into computers themselves, with no emotion or soul. At least back in his day, a kid could still be a kid, before their lives became ruled by technology. John hated using a cell phone but knew in this day and age, it was almost a necessity. No one at the office could fathom why he didn't want to carry it.

Cause when you have a work phone, you don't take your work home with you.....*you don't ever really leave work in the first place.*

Kendra had made all these plans to move to Los Angeles and never even asked him his opinion on any of it. He was just in her way at this point. One more hurdle she had to overcome to begin living her best life possible. She was getting money deposited in her account by wealthy men. John knew about it, as did Karen but, there wasn't much they could do. She was 21 and an adult as far as they were both concerned.....*just not a very nice adult.*

He and Karen never talked much about it. She had become almost numb to the world around her, especially in regards to Kendra. They still talked but Kendra did most of the talking and none of the listening. To her, the thumbs up and likes meant everything. She had followers on social media who were more than generous with their gratitude. He didn't even want to think about what she was doing to get that money in her account.

He slowed down as soon as he saw it. Everyone in the van put their phones down. The sign for Wendyville was back up. All of them knew what it meant. This was a textbook example of *The road less traveled*.

John didn't say anything as he turned onto the dirt road. After a few minutes, he saw the men wearing white suits and wearing sunglasses. They walked directly in front of his car. They just stood there, motionless for a minute. Finally, one of them broke ranks and walked over to John's window.

"This is private property sir," said one of the men

"I work for the mine," replied John.

The man just looked at John for a moment, then back away from the car and motioned him to pass. The other men blocking the road moved out of the way.

"That was weird," said Josh.

"Dad.....what happens when they realize you don't know a damn thing about mining?" asked Kendra.

"I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

John came into the town. He didn't stop at the gas station this time. He had 15 gallons of gas with him, which should be enough to get them back to Charleville. No one in the town paid them much attention. Josh was busy filming the entire town on his phone as was Kendra.

"Maybe now they'll believe us," said Josh.

"So.....what's the plan here?" asked Karen.

"We're going to drive to Hackney's office and fill him in on the impending disaster this afternoon. Maybe that will get his attention."

"It's so weird to see people walking and sitting without cell phones," said Josh.

They pulled into the tiny office used by the Queensland Police. They all got out and walked in. Hackney was sitting at his desk eating a sandwich.

"Back already? I figured you were on your way to turn in that machine of yours," he said.

"Morton.....sometime this afternoon, there's going to be a horrible explosion at the mine. Lots of people die.....including you. Is there any way you can shut the mine down for a day?"

Hackney said nothing and just continued to eat his sandwich.

"Shouldn't you be telling someone at the mine?"

"Probably, I just thought you might want to know that this is going to be your last day on Earth," said John.

Hackney finished up his sandwich and stood up. He wiped his mouth and grabbed his pack of cigarettes he kept in his shirt pocket.

"Take a walk with me John. The rest of you can wait here. We'll be right back." said Morton.

He followed Morton outside and they walked slowly down the sidewalk towards the gas station. Finally, Morton stopped and looked at John.

"I appreciate you coming here and telling us about the little explosion today. It says quite a bit about your character."

"It just sounded like a horrible way to die. I wouldn't want anyone to have to go through that," said John

"Well, John.....I'll let you in on our little secret here. *There is no explosion today at the mine,*" said Morton.

"No, there definitely is. May 8th, 1974. That's today's date."

"Well yes, there is an explosion but no one is killed. We just had to make it look like an explosion so no one would look for us."

"Huh?"

"See John.....a few days prior, some of the miners found something in that mine shaft that has been there for a very, very long time. It showed all of us the future.....and I can tell you, the future was very, very dark and scary. I guess you could almost call it: *Nightmarish.*"

"I suppose in many ways the future is always scary," said John

"John.....you daughter. She looks.....well.....how do I phrase this? She looks like the kind of girl that would be working in a brothel."

"You don't sugarcoat anything do you, Morton?"

"In your future, everyone is like her. There's no creativity or imagination, or arts or cinema.....there's not really any civilization. We created technology that has enslaved us. Technology kills the soul. That's what the UNIBOMBER was trying to make us understand. We created the chains and shackles around us. By the time we realized our mistake, it was too late. There was no stopping it. Killer drones and robots raining death down on anyone who dares to say no and take a stand. By the middle of the 21st century, there are very few real humans left in the world. Most, if not all of us are logged into the internet twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We become the very thing we feared most.....and most of us saw it coming but did nothing to stop it."

"What does that have to do with this town?"

"The machine in the mine showed us all of this and asked us what we wanted to do. It wanted us to make a choice. We could live out our lives with minimal technology in 1974.....or go about our business. I'm not married. I saw a human in the year 2100. It looked a lot like your daughter.....only there was nothing behind her eyes but ones and zeros. She had no soul. She

looked stunning but she wasn't a real person. I just couldn't imagine living like that....or my children or grandchildren living like that. I want them to be free....even if it's just the illusion of freedom."

John didn't quite know what to say. It was all beginning to add up....at least some of it.

"What exactly did you find in that mineshaft?"

"Something that.....well, let's just say something that did not want to be found. Something that came from a place far, far away."

"This thing is like alive or something?"

"Yes. It was just hibernating for a few million years."

"Morton.....shouldn't you be much older than you are? You should be dead already. 1974 was almost fifty years ago." said John.

"Time goes by very slowly here. Some of us are almost 130 years old but don't look a day over sixty. The machine can do amazing things. It can hide this town from the outside world."

"What does it want in return? Asked John

"Not sure really. Probably to go back to where it came from....wherever that is. I'm authorized to speak upon its behalf, so I have to ask you the same question I was asked all those years ago: *Do you want to stay.....or do you want to go?*"

John looked right at Morton. Suddenly everything made sense. He wasn't saving anyone in this town.....*they were trying to save him*. He knew what he had to do. He just had to talk it over with Karen.....and Josh and Kendra.

"I'll get back to you as soon as I have an answer."

"If you choose to stay.....you will be back in the year 1974.....forever. I just want you to understand." said Morton, pulling out a cigarette.

"Why did you act like 2016 hadn't happened yet the first time we pulled in here?" asked John.

"We had to be sure mate."

"Sure of what?"

"*It* had to be sure of you and your intentions."

"I see."

John walked back to the station. The kids and Karen were all sitting in the office. He walked into the office. Both the kids were playing on their phones. They didn't even look up at him.

"Karen.....can we talk for a second?"

They went outside and John started crying. They were both tears of joy and tears for knowing what he had to do. Karen hadn't seen her husband cry in like.....ever.

"What's wrong, John?" she asked trying to comfort him.

"We don't have a daughter.....we have a computer that looks like a daughter. Her entire life is an algorithm.....*a fucking algorithm*. Our entire existence is boiled down to an almost meaningless equation based on our time spent on the internet. Why didn't people try to stop this madness? If we leave here today.....we'll lose Kendra forever. We won't even be able to be disappointed in her or hate her.....*because you can't really hate a computer*." he said sobbing.

"What do you want to do?"

"I think you know what we have to do."

Karen looked away. She sat down on a nearby bench.

"You can't be serious? You can't ask us to do that, John?"

"Why not?"

"What about our family and friends?" she asked.

"We don't have any friends and our family can't even be bothered to send us a card for the holidays. We're all the four of us have. We're going to take that phone and that tablet and smash them into a thousand pieces.....it's either that or we lose one another. Take your pick."

"It doesn't have to be that way. I know she can be difficult but she's still our daughter."

"She belongs to the internet now. That's the only family she cares about. If it were just us, I would say no but, I'm doing this for the kids."

"There's got to be some other way."

"There is no other way.....that's why this town exists.....cause there is no other way."

"How do we tell the kids? Shouldn't they get a say in this?"

"No. She'll hate me but, maybe someday she will understand why I did it. I guess we'll just have to hope that day eventually arrives."

"She's not going to be happy. Are you prepared for what she might do when she finds out she isn't leaving?"

"I guess that's a chance we'll just have to take."

"She might not make it."

"I know. I still think we should do it."

"Okay.....okay.....just give me a little time to work this out. I'm never going to see my mom or my sisters ever again?"

"You can't stand your mom.....or your sisters. They probably won't even look for us."

"Are you sure about this? It's a big, big decision."

"It's the only way we can finally have our kids back."

Karen nodded. She loved and hated her husband at the same time. She knew he was right. This was the only way to save the kids.....*to save them from themselves.*

John found Morton and filled him in. He told them what would happen next. John gave him the keys to the van and both of their cell phones. They had to find a way to tell the kids. That was not going to be fun. He and Karen sat them down and politely told them that they were never leaving this town. *Not now, not ever.* Kendra did not take the news very well. She went from being annoyed to angry, to downright furious at her parents. She told them in no uncertain terms that she was not living in the year 1974 and that they would have to live here without her and stormed out of the office. John got up to go after her.

"Don't bother John. She won't get very far," said Morton as he stepped into the office.

An hour later Kendra came storming back into town. She flung the office door open and looked right at her parents.

"Did you have a nice walk dear?" asked Karen.

"Yeah, it was just fucking wonderful. I'm getting out of this town one way or another. With or without you." she said angrily.

"If I had a dime for every time I heard that, I could afford to buy real cigarettes," said Morton.

Kendra stormed out of the office.

"She'll come around. All the kids are like this at first. Tonight you'll meet the rest of the town and we'll have our first night in town ceremony. We'll put you up in the cottage down the street for a while. Don't get used to it though, it's just temporary till we can find you something more suitable."

That night, the O'Brien family met the rest of the townspeople. They were from all over. The Philippines, Brazil, Switzerland, and several from Australia. They were all very friendly and polite. Many wanted to know what was happening in the real world.

"A whole lot of nothing," replied John.

Morton took their phones from them and the entire town and the O'Briens drove to a giant pit on the edge of town. Everyone in town gathered around the junk pile. Morton took their phones and

tablet and earbuds and anything else they had on them and threw them into a giant pile of discarded technology. John and the kids were amazed to see what looked like a treasure trove of futuristic technology. Technology that was slowly killing them and stealing their souls.

"I think you're going to fit right in here just fine." said one of the townspeople.

Kendra said nothing as she looked at her father. She hated him so badly, she actually pictured herself stabbing him.

"I'm going to fuck every guy in this town, dad," she said angrily.

"I don't know honey. You might have to talk to them and have a real conversation with them first. That's not something your generation is very good at." said John smiling.

"I'll get out of here or I'll die trying," she said.

"Kendra, you might want to accept the fact that you're stuck in 1974 and you're never leaving. Try and make the most of it. Who knows? You might like it." said John as he pushed his SUV down the road into the pit.

"I almost wish you had just killed me and buried me out here." she snapped.

"Someday.....you'll understand why I did this.....someday.....I hope," he said as he watched the rental SUV smash into the side of the cliff, right along with dozens of other vehicles from years past.....and years into the future.