

Strange Things Happen In Nevada

short story by
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A father-son road trip from Idaho to Nevada leads to strange encounters with a Shoshone Indian legend.

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CHAPTER 1: Porcupine Quill Roadside Inn

“Out of this world experience.” Those were my father’s words when he announced that he was taking me on a road trip for my fourteenth birthday. He wouldn’t tell me where. He just said, “When the time is right, you will know, son.” He always calls me son. He only uses my name when he’s mad.

I think I know where he got that idea about “time” being right. Dad is always saying stuff like, “Did you know the Shoshone people still wear porcupine quills on their clothing?” Mom used to remind him this may be Shoshone country but there is not a drop of tribal blood in our veins, and Native American customs are not for us to appropriate.

Mom used to say that when we first moved to Idaho but she stopped after Dad took us to the Shoshone Ice Caves. Dad got in the spirit of the place and started quoting Chief Washakie. Mom scolded him. The Shoshone tour guide overheard them and talked about Chief Washakie being kind to the white man, believing in peace and respect, and some Shoshone woman Sacagawea helping the Lewis and Clark expedition, and I don’t know what else because I was distracted by a bat.

The bat dropped a souvenir on the back of my sister’s coat. For the rest of the tour that was all I could think about, when will she notice? She noticed when we left the cave and she blamed me. “I’m your brother. Would I do something like that?” She glared at me, and of course that meant yes. I still say the bat did it.

Bat guano or not, that ice cave sounds so good right now. Even with the fan on full blast, our rickety car feels like it’s about to melt into the asphalt.

We pass the occasional truck on an otherwise empty Great Basin Highway. I still have no idea where Dad is taking me for our father-son birthday road trip. My twin sister will get a separate celebration next week with Mom – because of the motel.

Leave it to my parents to buy a motel sight-unseen from a huge Gujarati family they just met, pack up our lives, and a month later turn the key at the Porcupine Quill Roadside Inn. When someone spontaneously decides to become an innkeeper, why pick Idaho of all places? It's not like we knew anybody here.

It must be easy when you have ten cousins in the motel business to help you get started. For our family, it's just the four of us. When we lived in California we played on the beach and went to Disneyland. And now we're exiled in the land of the giant potato.

My sister says Mom and Dad bought the motel because they have the spirit of adventure. I don't see anything adventurous about washing sheets and cleaning toilets for strangers who expect your family to be available all the time to help them find the right TV channel, or open their room when they lock themselves out, or chase off some coon or coyote that has decided to raid the garbage.

Coons and coyotes are a pain but the people visitors are worse. The Porcupine Quill Roadside Inn gets three kinds. Nature lovers bathe in the hot springs. Novelty seekers want to take pictures at Craters of the Moon and the World's Largest Potato. They can never decide, "Should we visit the giant potato at the Spud Drive-In, or the giant potato at the Idaho Potato Museum?" So many choices, so little time.

Then there are the weird guests who pay cash and keep to themselves. I probably shouldn't judge. I keep to myself, too. Though for a chance to go back home to California I would be willing to spend a whole week with people. Even parents. My parents.

The night before we left for this birthday trip, I overheard Mom and Dad.

“...enough time to adjust...”

“...needs his father...”

“...made a mistake... just hope it’s not too late.”

“Give it a chance ... stranger things have happened.”

CHAPTER 2: Welcome to Nevada

Northern Nevada sagebrush steppe looks a lot like southern Idaho. That's the latest from the Department of Stating the Obvious. I'm here with Dad so what do you expect? He's the King of Stating the Obvious. If it rains, he'll say, "It's raining." If we're having potatoes for dinner, he'll say, "Potatoes for dinner." Thanks, Dad.

So here I sit with Dad on the Great Basin Highway. A blue sign with white letters welcomes us to Nevada, the Silver State. Another sign provides a toll free number to report shooting from highway. The radio picks up static. I change the station. Country. Casino weekend special, kids eat free. Classic rock. Talk radio. Extreme heat alert warning. Country. Country.

"So can you guess?" Dad speaks for the first time in two hours.

"What?"

"Where we're going."

"Are we there yet?"

"Come on, guess."

We've already passed four signs for roadside casinos with greasy spoon diners. We could also wash our truck at a truck wash. If we had a truck.

"Don't you think I'm a little young for a casino?"

Dad laughs like it's the best joke he's ever heard. Even in Nevada, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't let a thirteen year old gamble, even if he's about to turn fourteen. Handle firearms, maybe. Drive a truck, perhaps. But not gamble.

“Come on, guess again.” Dad can barely contain himself. I haven’t seen him this excited since Disneyland.

“You okay, Dad?”

“Never better. You, me, and some father-son time.”

“Aren’t you going the wrong way?”

“Why?”

“The giant potatoes are further up North. I think you missed an exit.”

“It’s your birthday so I’m going to ignore the sarcasm. Now guess.”

“I guess when the time is right, I’ll know?”

Dad’s smirk fades. He hates it when I guess correctly. I don’t want to keep playing this game. I also don’t want him to turn the car around in case we are actually driving home to California. So I change the subject.

“It’s hot. I’m thirsty.”

“You can get a soda when we stop for gas.”

“You still have half a tank.”

“We better stop soon. It’s dangerous to run out of gas in the middle of no where. Especially in this heat.”

“Okay. Whatever. I’m tired.” I close my eyes. That was the longest conversation this father and son have had all year.

“I’ll give you a hint.”

I pretend to sleep. Dad doesn’t buy it. He’s used this trick on Mom.

“Son, we’re in Nevada.”

“No, really?”

“Okay, Mr Sarcastic. That’s enough. You just might enjoy spending time with your old man. Stranger things have happened in Nevada.”

“Are we staying in Nevada?” Silently I add, please say no.

“When the time comes, you’ll know. It’ll be out of this world!”

It occurs to me that he’s been using that phrase a lot. Out of this world. Is Dad just being Dad or are we going to see Area 51?

Area 51 is famous for UFO sightings. You can get to it by a road that is actually called the Extra-Terrestrial Highway. I don’t believe in aliens, of course. I just wonder. After all, we did live in California. Aliens are a big deal in Nevada, too, especially near Las Vegas. Mom says that explains a lot about Las Vegas.

I stare out the window at the mountains on the horizon. I imagine aliens abducting a bunch of tourists with a giant potato. That’s when the car stalls.

CHAPTER 3: History Lesson

Dad panics, “Wouldn’t you know it, we’ve stopped! Here we are alone in the middle of no where!” Thanks, Dad, for pointing out the obvious again.

Dad gets out to investigate. I try his cell phone. No reception. Dad opens the hood, examines the engine. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know anything about cars but I don’t say anything. Dad comes back, turns the key in the ignition. The engine turns, turns, then starts. The gas gauge is at empty.

Dad scratches his head, “How can we be out of gas already? It was just half-full!”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and there will be a gas station in the next thirty seconds.”

“That’s enough, Brody! Enough with the sarcasm!” Okay, so maybe my timing wasn’t the greatest but he didn’t have to yell. Especially since I was right.

We pass a slow-moving transport truck and there, in the middle of no where, sits a small shack with a couple of gas pumps.

A big-bellied old man picks up a magazine from a red roadside mailbox. He waddles over to a rickety chair in front of the gas station. Suspenders hold up his worn blue jeans to a red plaid shirt. He twirls his grey mustache. Small beady eyes peer from his round spectacles. A mixed-breed mutt lays sprawled out at his feet.

The dog wags its tail and the man grins at our arrival. They’re both missing a tooth on the right side.

“Mornin’ folks. Welcome to Nevada.”

How did he know? Have we spent so much time at the Porcupine Quill Roadside Inn that we are starting to look like tourists? Then I realize our license plates say Idaho. That's how he knew. Why am I so jumpy? Maybe it's the heat.

"Dad, I'm gonna get a soda."

"Get me one, too. Cola or iced tea," Dad says nicely as he unscrews the cap to our gas tank. I don't answer. I wonder if he feels bad for yelling at me. He repeats louder, "Cola or iced tea."

"I know, Dad! I'm not deaf!" Dad watches me a moment, then turns away to pump the gas.

I walk up to the old man. He seems friendly enough.

"Do you have any cold cola?"

"Well, now, son –"

Another one calls me son. I take a breath to tell him off when I notice that he's cleaning a rifle. That's not unusual around these parts, though my California blood never quite got used to it. As they say, this ain't gun control country. I silently wish I had written down that toll free number from the highway.

The old man points the gun to a scratched up old cooler. "What you see is what you get."

Apparently what you get is a few cans of lukewarm root beer. I pop one open and mumble to myself about better selection in California.

"Two months," the old man says.

"Excuse me?"

“You got two months, son?” He turns his rifle and cleans the other side. I take a silent gulp of my lukewarm root beer.

He grins, giving me full view of his missing tooth. “My granddaddy traveled from here to the West Coast on the California Trail. Took him two months.”

“Oh.”

“Hard country. Dry country. Liable to need more than that little soda you got there.”

I take another gulp.

“If you got your heart set, plenty ways to get to California.” Great, the man with a gun overheard me complaining. I make a mental note to keep my mouth shut.

He continues, “Old Pony Express used to come this way. Course, not very economical-like. Nowadays you can drive.”

He looks me over.

“You better let your pa drive. Don’t go riding a camel on the highway. That’s illegal in Nevada. Yessir, if you gonna ride a camel, best ride in the mountains.”

I think to myself, camels in Nevada?

The old man keeps talking, “Folks say there’s gold in them mountains. Tall tales is all. Just ‘cause you see tree markings, it don’t mean there’s gold buried thereabouts. My granddaddy used to mark them trees when he got bored herding sheep.”

“I thought you said your granddaddy went to California.” As soon as the words leave my mouth I wish I could put them back in.

The old man studies me a moment, then answers dryly, “He come back.”

The dog sniffs my pants. I step away before he can lift his leg. The dog trots over to the red mailbox and does his business.

Suddenly, something crashes inside the gas station shack. The old man reassures me, "Oh, that's just the alien. We got UFO in these parts."

Alien? UFO? Either this trip just got a lot more interesting or this old man is off his rocker.

"Thanks for the history lesson." I try to make my sarcasm sound sincere, on account of his rifle. I rush over to Dad and hand him his soda.

"Root beer?"

"It's all they had."

"Thanks, son."

As much as I want to get away from the crazy man with the gun, I really need to use the bathroom. Through the bathroom wall I hear a girl's voice, "Why do you keep telling people I'm an alien?"

The old man answers, "Government calls you an alien."

"I'm from Canada!" The girl sighs in frustration. "What's all this talk about UFO?"

"You know I'm the president."

"United Federation of Old Men Sittin' And Thinkin'? That would be UFOMSAT."

"UFOMSAT? Not very economical-like."

"You could have told them I'm from Canada."

The old man laughs, "Where is the fun in that?"

Out by the car, I drink the rest of my lukewarm root beer, waiting for Dad to finish his business. It's weird with this dog staring at me.

The old man comes back outside, parks himself in his rickety chair.

"You turning fourteen, that right?"

"Yes." Dad must have told him while I was in the bathroom. Thanks, Dad.

"Gonna be a man."

"I guess."

"You and your pa gonna have a trip you ain't likely to forget."

"I bet."

He grins again, then speaks so quiet it's almost a whisper, "Son, round these parts we don't like it much when a young 'un talks disrespectful-like."

Did I offend a crazy old man with a gun?

"You better go on and apologize." I am in no position to argue. Dad is still in the bathroom. I don't think he heard. The dog glares at me.

"I'm sorry?"

"When you apologize, you oughta say what you're apologizing fer."

And then I remember what I heard in the bathroom. I figure he's all talk and I do the dumbest thing a boy can possibly do when faced with a crazy old man with a gun: I get sarcastic.

"I'm sorry I asked for cold cola?"

"Don't get smart with me, boy. And don't go gettin' smart with your pa, neither."

The old man clangs his rifle so loud that I jump. "You got a lot to learn, son. Be learnin' real soon."

CHAPTER 4: The Accident

Once we are safely out of shooting range, I glance back through the rear window. We must have driven further than I thought because I can't see the old man or his gas station. All I see is open country and a couple of trucks on the highway.

I keep thinking about what the old man said about me getting smart with Dad. So what if I do? It's not my fault. I have a right to be mad. It wasn't my decision to leave our home in California. Still, a man with a gun has a way of making you think.

"Hey, Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"They only had root beer."

"I know."

"I mean, I would've gotten you a cola or iced tea if they had any."

That's as close to an apology as I'm willing to give. Dad looks at me a long time. I can feel his gaze as I stare out the window.

Finally Dad speaks, "We'll have iced tea when we get home."

"Are we going home?"

"Where do you want to go?"

I just look at him. He knows there is only one place I want to go for my birthday or ever.

"Son, it would be a long drive back home to Idaho."

"You mean it would be a long drive *from* home *to* Idaho?"

“Home *to* Idaho.”

“Home *from* Idaho.”

“To Ida—“

And then something happens that scares the daylights out of both of us. We are so busy arguing that only at the last second I notice that our car is headed directly for an Indian man standing right in the middle of the highway.

“Dad, look out!” Dad honks the horn. With a loud thud the man’s body bounces off our hood before Dad can swerve. A transport truck just barely misses us. Dad turns off the engine. My heart pounds.

We sit there frozen in shock. Finally I ask, “Is he dead?”

We both jump out of the car.

“Where is he, Dad?”

The highway. No traffic. No body. Dad examines the hood of our car. “Not a scratch. If you weren’t with me, I’d say I’m hallucinating from the heat.”

“We both saw him.”

For miles around, it’s wide open steppe with the occasional clump of sagebrush. No man could hide without being seen. I’m so scared I can’t help making a joke, “Maybe he turned into a bird and flew away.”

Despite our better judgment, Dad and I both look up. The sky is clear and blue. No birds in sight.

“Well, we can’t help him if he’s not here to be helped.” Dad gets in the car.

Out of the corner of my eye I see something move. Was it a tumbleweed? Do tumbleweeds even tumble in these parts? The object stops behind a clump of sagebrush.

Two beady eyes stare at me. It's just a coyote.

My heart still pounding, I follow Dad to the car.

"You okay to drive, Dad?"

"Strange things happen in Nevada."

"You can say that again."

"Let's find a place to rest a while."

"Yeah, okay, Dad, how about a rest stop, seeing as there aren't any?"

Dad just stares out the front windshield.

"Dad, it would have been a long drive back *from* home *to* Idaho. I guess we can go somewhere else. For now. As long as there's no giant potato."

Dad doesn't answer.

"Dad?"

He rubs his face, takes a deep breath. I've never seen him look so tired.

"You okay, Dad?"

"There's a small town a few miles up the road. We can wait out the heat there."

"Okay. And Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it really illegal in Nevada to drive a camel on a highway?"

Dad doesn't smile or anything. He turns on the engine and says, "Just to be on the safe side, I think we'll take the car."

CHAPTER 5: Ghost Town

A few miles up the road a sign welcomes us to Deeth, Nevada. Population: 20.

The name looks familiar.

“Isn’t this a ghost town?”

“Semi-ghost town. The post office is in service. A few ranchers still live here.”

“Seriously, Dad? You want to stop in a ghost town?”

“There’s no such thing as a ghost, son. Ghost town just means an abandoned town.”

“I know. It’s just – there might be coons or coyotes or something.”

“If you’re afraid we can keep driving.”

“No. Not – afraid. I just don’t want them to get at our food, that’s all.” Coons and coyotes are a nuisance at the Porcupine Quill Roadside Inn. We had to put special locks on the garbage bins. “But, whatever, Dad, we can stop here if you need a break.”

The only shade we can find is an abandoned farm house. The people must have left in a hurry because they left everything, including their vehicles. Even their tractor sits rusting in the field.

I’ve had enough togetherness with Dad. When he suggests we take a siesta to wait out the midday heat, I decide to take a walk.

He tries to stop me, “It’s hot.”

“I’ll be fine, Dad. Just want to stretch my legs. We’ve been driving for three hours.”

“Take water.” He holds out the water canteen for me.

“I’m not thirsty,” I say as I walk away. I know he’ll watch me go with that Dad look he gets. I hate it when he gets like that so I don’t look back.

The farm house is falling apart. Overgrown weeds. Hole in the roof. Broken door. Not much to look at. It only takes a few minutes to walk around the whole building, back to the driveway.

That’s when I notice that our car is gone.

“Dad!” I shout. “Dad!”

Maybe Dad just moved the car. But if he did, wouldn’t I have heard the engine? I check the ground to see which way he drove. The dust lays untouched except for my own footprints. No tire marks. It’s like we never drove through here in the first place.

“Dad! Where are you?”

Despite the scorching sun, I run around the farmhouse the other way.

“Dad! Dad! Okay, Dad! You got me. Joke is over!” I know it’s not a joke. My Dad is not the prankster type.

I start to feel dizzy in the heat. The sun stings my eyes. I take shelter in one of the abandoned rusting pickup trucks. Something small and beady-eyed runs toward me.

“Dad?”

I wake up next to a small campfire. I sit up. My head hurts. A hand touches my shoulder. Dad must have found me!

“Dad, the water canteen – “

But the man behind me is not Dad. It’s the Indian from the highway.

CHAPTER 6: Itsappe

Maybe it's just fear feeding my imagination. It all happened so fast. Can I really be sure this man is the Indian from the highway? I recognize porcupine quill embroidery on his clothing. Is he Shoshone?

The man hands me a cup of water. At least I hope it's water. My lips are so parched they are starting to crack. I want water more than anything. But what if he put something else in the cup? Can I trust him?

He seems to know what I'm thinking. He takes the cup, drinks half the liquid, then hands it back to me. The liquid doesn't smell like anything so I drink it. I hold out the cup for more. He pours from a canteen. Our canteen!

"Where did you get that?" I ask. Silently he places the canteen on the ground. Why won't he answer me? "Do you speak English? Who are you?"

He turns back to the fire. I think I hear him say, "What's happening?" I breathe a sigh of relief. It seems like a strange thing for him to say but I'm just happy we speak the same language.

"Yes! What's happening? I was out with my dad. And now we're here, and on the highway – was that you on the –"

He doesn't smile but his eyes do. He places his hand on his heart and says, "Itsappe."

My heart sinks. So that's what he was saying. I don't speak Shoshone or whatever he is speaking. He didn't understand me, did he?

He points to me, “Doon’yah pua. Dainah.”

“What are you saying?” He doesn’t answer. “I need to get out of here. I need to find my Dad.” I get up to walk away.

“When we speak the language we honor our ancestors.”

So he does speak English!

“Doon’yah pua.”

“Do ya – what?”

“Doon’yah pua means boy in Shoshone. Dainah is man.”

“I don’t want a language lesson. I want to find my Dad.”

“Doon’yah builds home. Dainah goes home.”

I stare at him a moment. He pulls out a knife. He must be crazier than the old man at the gas station! There’s only one thing to do: run.

I run and run and run and run. There are rattlesnakes and scorpions in these parts but I don’t care. I just want to find Dad and get out of here!

I’ve been running for what feels like fifteen minutes. The hot air distorts the image but I am sure I see a familiar figure up ahead.

“Dad!” I shout without thinking.

I run faster and suddenly I am right back where I started. The Indian uses his knife to sharpen the end of a long wooden pole. Where did he get the wood? There aren’t any trees for miles!

I run again and end up right back where I started – again. The Indian says, “Some are smart but not wise.”

He finishes sharpening the end of a pole, adds it to a pile of other poles. He puts away the knife and places his hand on my shoulder. “You build home. Honor ancestors. Respect, home. No respect, no home.”

He hands me a wooden pole and says, “Respect.” He secures one end in the ground and hands me another pole as he says, “Humility.”

Around us it’s miles and miles of open steppe with no sign of human life. How did I get here? Is this strange man my only hope of survival? Since he put away his knife maybe he doesn’t intend to kill me after all.

I get up the courage to speak, “Look, Itsappe or whatever your name is, I don’t have time for this – building a home. I need to *get* home.”

He says, “You help me build home. I help you find home.” Can I trust him? Do I have a choice?

Itsappe keeps handing me the poles, and with each one he states a virtue: happiness, love, faith, kinship. By the time he gets to thankfulness, something in me changes. I think about the Porcupine Quill Roadside Inn and Dad’s words, “When the time comes, you’ll know.” What if I never see Dad again?

I finally know where Dad and I should go for my birthday. I just hope I live long enough to tell him.

CHAPTER 7: The Boy Is Gone

I open my eyes. The sun blinds me through the cracked windshield. Someone calls my name. It takes me a moment to recognize the voice. I clamber out of the rusty old pickup truck. All my muscles ache. My face feels sunburned.

“Dad!” my voice is hoarse. It comes out barely a whisper. I need water.

“Here you are! I’ve been calling you for five minutes!”

“You followed me?”

“I know you’re not thirsty but this is Nevada. You really should take the canteen.”

Dad hands me the water canteen.

I drink. “How long were you following me?”

“I don’t know. Five minutes?”

Five minutes? How could all that have happened in five minutes? And how did Dad get the canteen back from Itsappe?

I splash water on my face. Dad touches my forehead.

“You’re burning up. Drink some more water.”

“You have some too.”

“It’s almost empty. You better finish it. I don’t want you getting heat stroke, especially on your birthday.”

As we head back to our car, I think that Dad was right. I should have taken the canteen.

We head back to US-80. Dad says, “The closest town going West is Elko, at least a half hour. The gas station is the other way but it’s closer. We can go back there to get you something to drink fast. I should have thought to bring more water.”

I am so thirsty that I don’t care if I have to face the old man with the gun or his weird-looking dog that does business at the mailbox. I just need water or root beer or anything to quench my thirst and stop this headache.

We drive back the way we came. After a few minutes Dad says, “That’s funny.”

“What?”

“I could have sworn the gas station was right here.”

“Pull over, Dad. I recognize this red mailbox.”

“It’s just a mailbox. There is nothing here, son.”

“Look, Dad.” A beady pair of eyes stares at us from behind a sagebrush scrub.

“Coyote. Did you know the Shoshone people tell many stories about the coyote?” I’ve heard Dad say stuff like that before but this time it doesn’t sound lame. “He’s a great teacher and a trickster, the shape shifter. They say he appears when we need to change.”

“Dad, what’s the Shoshone word for coyote?” I ask, though I suspect I already know the answer.

Dad seems pleasantly surprised to hear me ask. “His name is Itsappe.”

We drive another fifteen minutes on US-80. Once we reach the Great Basin Highway again, Dad says, “We probably just passed the gas station without realizing.” I know we didn’t.

We stop for lunch at a casino greasy spoon diner. I drink a large soda in one gulp. The headache starts to fade. Dad covers our table with a map of Nevada.

“We are here in Wells. Here to Reno is about five hours West. And Reno to California is – “

“How far is Driggs?”

“Driggs?”

“You know, Driggs.”

“Driggs, Idaho?”

“Yeah.”

“About six hours. North.” He doesn’t ask why, though the question is written all over his face.

“I was just wondering what’s playing tonight at the Spud Drive-In.”

Dad studies my face for any trace of sarcasm. “You want to go to the Spud Drive-In.”

“Yeah.”

“Spud Drive-In, the home of the giant potato?”

“I’ve never been.”

Dad slides his icy soda in my direction. I slide it back and say, “It’s not the heat stroke, Dad. You said when the time comes, I’ll know.” I quickly add, “But I get to pick the movie. It’s my birthday.”

Dad smiles, “Strange things happen in Nevada.”

Strange things indeed.
