

I hit the road early, just as the red-rubber ball sun crested the eastern horizon. It glowed in my rear view mirror for several minutes, then advanced into the white-hot haze typical on the plains. I drove with the windows open and nodded in time to the classic rock stations that somehow cut through the humidity and throbbed through my radio speakers. I had to entertain myself somehow. I had a number of hours behind me, and much farther that day to travel.

I was deep into long-distance hypnosis and singing along with Bob Seger when I stopped to shudder with a sudden realization. Just like his song said, I was indeed driving on a long, lonesome highway east of Omaha. Goose bumps rose on my arms and shoulders, even as the heat from the black steering wheel threatened to burn the skin on my palms. The coincidence was enough to bring my mind to an immediate alert. My panic was quickly eased by the sight of a green exit sign in the distance. I sped up to reach it and followed the lane indicated by the white arrow, veering away from the main stretch. With any luck, I would find a McDonald's so I could calm down, empty my bladder, and then fill myself up again with the contents of a gleaming, sweating plastic cup of cold Coke.

No directional signs greeted me at the intersection. And I had been so lost in reverie that I had only a general notion of my location. But I could see the silhouette of a town off to the right, five miles or more away. The grain elevator, the tallest structure visible, shimmered amid the pulsing thermals. I put on the turn signal – why, I haven't a clue, for mine was the only vehicle on the road – and wheeled north toward the town. The car interior instantly turned cool as the sun repositioned itself to beam onto the backseat instead of on me. I shuddered again.

The landscape I drove through was dryasdust and tabletop flat, the two-lane road as straight as a 50-yard line. Barbed-wire fences framed the pavement, cordoning off empty pastures dotted with brush. I glanced from one side to another and spotted no animals, barns, or out-buildings. A few white butterflies drifted above the roadside clover, and the sound of crickets met my ears, but all else seemed still. Ahead of me, the town grew ever larger and more distinct as each mile passed.

After what seemed like decades but was probably a matter of mere minutes, I reached the edge of the tiny fragment of civilization. I wasn't entirely at ease with what I saw. No wooden placard welcomed me or announced the name of the town and the number of its residents. Empty storefronts with large dark windows lined the main street. A few cars were parked in the diagonal spaces before them, but no people were in sight. And the cars themselves were older models, big old boats with boxy fenders but in decent condition. I crept ahead, searching for some sign of life, and I wondered if I had stumbled onto a true ghost town. The block on the right soon opened up to reveal the oldest gas station I had ever seen. Amazingly enough, the word OPEN glowed in pink and blue neon in the window of the small white building, where I saw a few shadowy figures at the open doorway. Looking at my gas gauge, I knew I should take advantage

of the opportunity before me. I pulled up to the single old-fashioned pump, not knowing if it was even operational. I wouldn't have been surprised if Goober Pyle himself had jumped out to offer to check my oil.

Tentatively, I lifted the nozzle from its support, slipped it into the gas tank and pulled the trigger. I felt the power of the liquid coursing into my car, and my heart eased a bit. I looked at the numbers on the pump face and was shocked to see a gas price I hadn't seen in several years. Had no one bothered to change the digits, or would I be getting a true bargain? There was no way to know until I paid the bill. It would have to be in cash, for this pump pre-dated credit card payments. I decided to take the risk and fill the tank.

As I stood next to the car, I looked around the town a bit more. Behind the station was a row of small but nicely-maintained houses with lovely yards and flower gardens. Someone did indeed live here. But where were they? And where did they work? As I puzzled over what I saw, I heard water splashing. I looked down in horror to see gas pouring out of the nozzle and onto my car and the pavement. The splashing came dangerously close to hitting my jeans and new white sneakers. I released the trigger and stopped the flow, realizing in the process that the pump didn't have a dingus to automatically shut off when the gas tank was full. Embarrassed, I grabbed a few paper towels from a nearby dispenser and wiped off my hands and the side of the car. Old stains and sawdust remnants on the concrete told me that I wasn't the first one to make the mistake.

As I approached the building to pay my bill, an old man shuffled out toward me. With his head bent down and his eyes lowered, he seemed not to see me, so I deftly maneuvered out of his way. I heard his faint mumbling as he continued to shuffle by.

"Don't mind Enis," a male voice echoed from inside the building. "He's as blind as a bat and didn't even see ya." The speaker was a man with a white mane of hair and a merry glint in his blue eyes. He sat on a stool just inside the door. He was the only other person in the place, so I assumed he was the clerk. I dug into my wallet and handed him a twenty. "Nah, your money's no good here." His voice had a definite Western twang to it, and his smile extended from one ear to the other. He waved at me to put my wallet away.

"What? I don't understand. I owe you for the gas." I held the bill out to him.

"Forget it." He waved me away again. Then he cocked his head to one side as if he was listening to a distant sound; and seeing his gesture, I focused my ears as well. A rhythmic thrumping grew ever louder, and within a few seconds I recognized it as coming from the blades of a low-flying helicopter. "Gotta go," the clerk said, and he jumped off his stool and pushed me gently out the door. "We're closed." He quickly turned off the OPEN sign and locked the door behind us. Then he stopped to look at me. "Oh, you're here now. Might as well come with and join us." He grabbed my arm with bony but strong fingers, and I had no choice but to move with him.

A fascinating sight greeted my eyes as we hurried toward the main street. From seemingly out of nowhere, other people had materialized, all senior citizens, and all were moving as fast as they could toward the grain elevator at the end of the street. Some used canes, some used walkers, a few were in mechanized wheelchairs. We passed the dotard Enis, still shuffling and mumbling to himself, headed in the same direction as the growing crowd. No one spoke, for the drone of the approaching helicopter was gaining in intensity. I saw the craft hovering over the parking lot at the grain elevator, where it obviously was intending to land. The station clerk still had a firm grip on me, and I was suddenly terrified. What had I stumbled onto? Were the police coming to take someone away? Was this some kind of drug sting? Or worse, was this community some kind of dystopia that did away with intruding visitors? Namely, me?

When we reached the parking lot, the helicopter was already resting on the pavement, and its blades were winding down in rotation. All of the town inhabitants were making their way into a low building alongside the three-story concrete structure. Many were laughing and smiling, and a party atmosphere seemed to emanate from the group. The clerk pushed me through the doorway, and a blast of arctic air conditioning hit my body. I saw that the place was a kind of dining hall, able to seat maybe a hundred people. “Who’s this, Ralph? You snag another one?” A grotesque and dolichocephalic woman appeared to be acting as hostess.

“Yup,” said the clerk beside me, “but what’s it gonna hurt?” No one around us answered, other than to laugh and clap both him and me on the back. The horse-faced greeter reared back and whinnied.

As we found seats in the folding chairs at the farthest table, Ralph winked at me from across the paper tablecloth. He explained quickly. “See, the town was on the verge of bankruptcy back in the ‘80s. Too many people movin’ away, farms disappearin’, grainery closed, no one wanted to live in the middle of nowhere no more. Only way the officials could think to save the place was to buy a bunch of lottery tickets and hope for the best. Lotta prayin’ done the night of the drawin’, I can tell you that, and bingo! We won the pot. Had smart people invest it for us, and now we’re livin’ the Life of Riley here. ‘Course, we’re still out in the boonies, and nobody but us oldsters wants to stick around the place. But those that do don’t have to shell out any pennies for anything, anymore, ‘cause the town does for us all.”

I swallowed in relief and looked around at the people at the tables, greeting each other as if it were a family reunion. I was clearly the youngest person in the room, perhaps by two or three decades. “And the helicopter?” I asked, turning back to Ralph.

“Flies in once a month, but we never know exactly when. Brings fresh Maine lobster. Chesapeake scallops as big as your fist. Haddock that melts on the tongue. And all of it free, free, free! And then we celebrate with a movie afterward.” He pointed to a big-screen TV angled in a corner.

“But what about me, Ralph? I don’t live here.” I still felt uneasy.

“You’re my guest for tonight. We let outsiders in every once in a while.” He winked at me again. “But don’t get too comfortable,” he whispered, leaning toward me from across the table. “You’ll have to skedaddle right after dessert.”

With a solemn promise to obey the rules, I found myself thoroughly enjoying the outing. Everyone sat around and talked for almost an hour, as the monthly seafood meal was being prepared in the kitchen. It was a regular gathering for them, a rare splurge that they delighted in. For while the town had money, the people had learned to use it wisely and sparingly. When the food came, it was just as Ralph described it, utterly delicious. As I savored a variety of scrumptious morsels dipped in melted butter, I listened to the conversations around me and didn’t ask many questions, since it seemed rude to do so. It turned out that the only business these people deemed necessary anymore was a combination grocery, pharmacy and general store that they created from another part of the vacant elevator complex. What some would label poverty, these folks considered merely frugality.

I did wonder about the lack of signs. “Hell, we know where we are,” Ralph replied. When Stella, sitting next to Ralph, reported excitedly about the trip she and some others had taken in the spring to witness bird migrations in Cape May, New Jersey, I asked Ralph if he had gone along. “Nah,” he waved in Stella’s direction. “Only bird I wanna see is a big ol’ tom turkey, migratin’ from the oven to the middle of the table on Thanksgiving!” Those around him smiled and shook their heads. They’d obviously heard him express his opinions many times. Not wanting to intrude further on their hospitality, I left just as the servings of cherry pie were being passed around.

The sky was turning duskish as I drove out of Fortunato, as I came to call the place, since I never did learn its true identity. A few months later as I passed back through that part of the state, I kept an eye out for the exit that led to the mysterious senior citizen community. Somehow I drove right past it. But along the way I caught a glimpse of a helicopter skirting above the horizon, and my mouth watered at the sight. Ralph and his friends would be eating well that night.