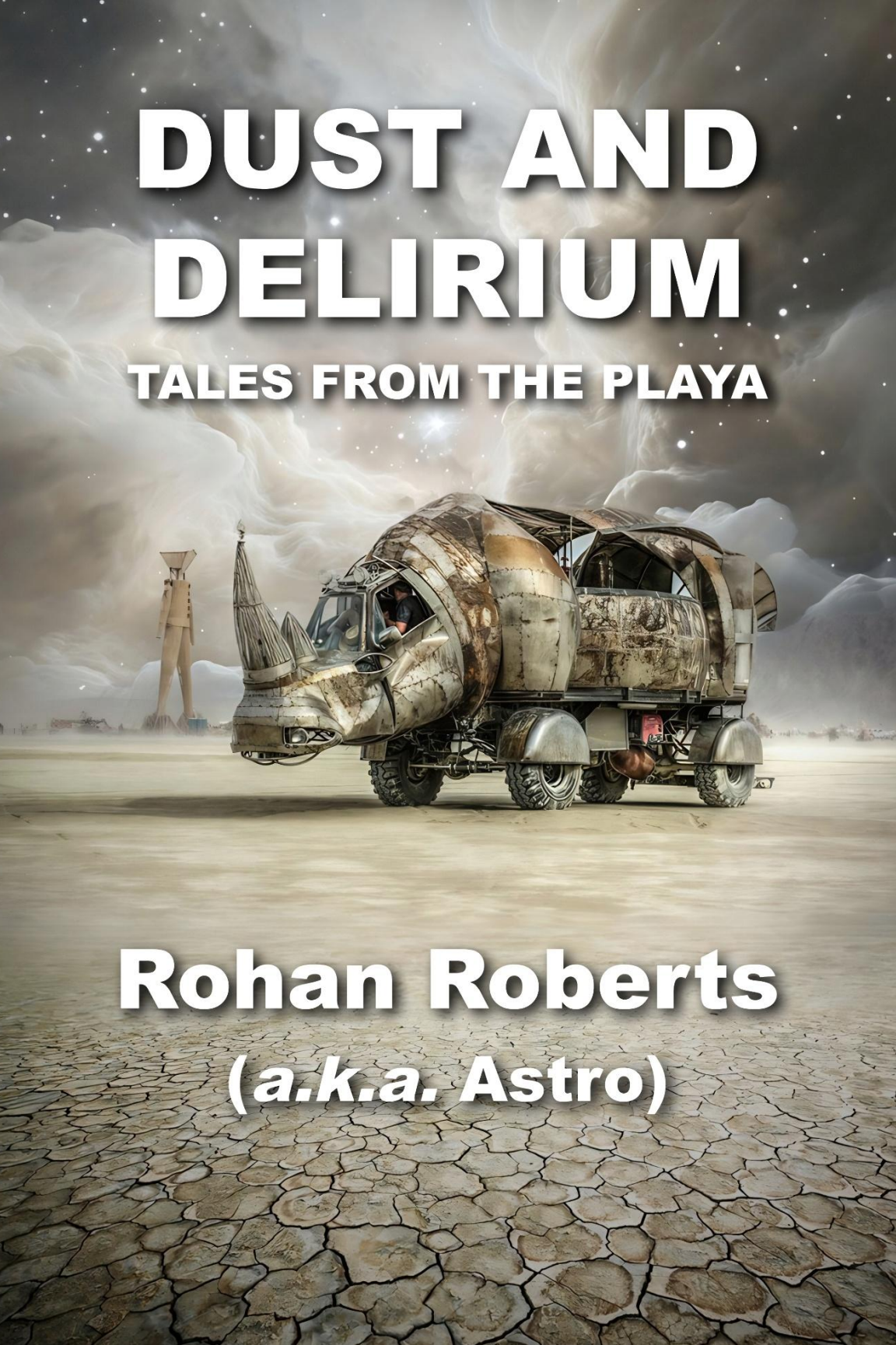
DUST AND DELIRIUM

TALES FROM THE PLAYA



Rohan Roberts

(*a.k.a.* Astro)

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Rohan Roberts



Happy Hub Press

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For Good Rainbow and Burners everywhere

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Preface

In 2016, I attended my first Burn. By August 2024, I had participated in seven Burning Mans in Nevada, three AfrikaBurns in South Africa, and even designed and built the temple at the 2017 Netherlands Burn. Over the years, I've learned that no matter how many times you go, the desert always finds new ways to astonish you.

This book is a collection of true tales from the playa — stories born of dust, delirium, and the strange alchemy that happens when art, absurdity, and awe collide. Every one of these vignettes is based on a real incident. Some names and details have been changed to protect the innocent, the mischievous, and the mildly incriminating — but the essence of each story remains true.

My aim in gathering these tales is simple: to capture the wonder, whimsy, mischief, and magic that make Burning Man unlike anything else on Earth. These are stories of dust-streaked laughter and unexpected grace; of pranks that turned into revelations; of hunger that became communion; of strangers who became legends.

My previous book, *Burn Brilliantly: Burning Man in Quotes*, was an attempt to describe the ineffable through the voices of others. This one is an attempt to show it through lived experience. These are snapshots from a temporary city that vanishes without a trace, yet somehow leaves an indelible mark on everyone who's ever been there.

Out here, the absurd often reveals the profound. A prank can become a parable. A coincidence can feel like divine choreography. And what begins as chaos often resolves into something that feels eerily like grace.

The stories that follow are my offering to the community that taught me to build, to let go, and to believe — not in certainty, but in serendipity.

Welcome to the dust.

Rohan Roberts
Black Rock City / Dubai
October 2025

The Bicycle Apocalypse

He thought he broke the Burn. Turns out he just got welcomed the hard way.

It was around 3 a.m., the kind of hour where time feels optional and everything is either hilarious or holy.

We'd just returned to camp after a night of roaming soundscapes and mutant vehicles, our clothes streaked with dust, our legs a little jelly-like from hours of dancing under LED stars.

Someone passed around a bag of half-melted gummy bears. Someone else found a packet of wasabi peas. The fire poi twirler next door had finally run out of energy. For a moment, camp was quiet. Sacred, almost.

Matthew flopped into a folding chair with the dramatic sigh of a man unaccustomed to folding chairs. He looked like a winded accountant on safari.

This was his first Burn.

In the default world, Matthew was a human resources executive — the kind who wore Patagonia vests and used the phrase "let's circle back" without irony. But here, he was just another Burner with dusty boots, a cracked water bottle, and an open heart.

"I think I'll head back to camp," he said after a while, stifling a yawn.

"You sure?" someone asked. "You good to navigate?"

He nodded. "I have my bike. It's like, what? Two o'clock from here?"

We shrugged. Directions are loose at Burning Man. He mounted his bike, saluted us dramatically, and pedaled off into the night.

The playa at 3:15 a.m. is both endless and intimate.

You can see for miles and still be utterly alone. Sounds carry strangely. Light bends. Nothing is where it's supposed to be, and everything glows like it's got a secret.

Matthew pedaled steadily, eyes squinting at the blurry street signs, his bike light flickering with theatrical unreliability.

"Two o'clock from here," he muttered. "Past the art car with the flaming octopus… or was it before the giant rubber duck?"

The city grid had dissolved into a dusty dreamscape. He passed a lone ballerina spinning silently under a disco ball. A man in a tuxedo offered him an invisible martini. Someone somewhere was playing a didgeridoo into a traffic cone.

Then—voices.

Faint at first, then louder.

Wheels. Lights. Movement. A group of cyclists emerging from the dark like a glowing school of fish.

They were coming fast. Five of them, maybe six. Lights strung from their spokes. Bodies low. Eyes hidden behind goggles and kaleidoscope glasses.

Matthew slowed down, unsure whether to wave or veer off. He turned gently right. So did they. He turned left. They mirrored him. He pedaled faster. So did they.

"Okay…" he muttered, half-laughing. "Weird flex, but alright."

But they kept closing in.

Now they surrounded him—tight, too tight. Their bikes weaving within inches of his. The kind of tight where a wrong breath could cause a tangle.

"Hey guys…uh…maybe give me a little room?" he called out.

No reply. Just spinning wheels and intense, eerie focus.

Then someone barked, "*Look out!*"

It happened in a blink.

A wheel clipped a pedal. A handlebar jerked. Someone swerved too hard, and like dominoes dipped in glitter, the cyclists went flying.

One somersaulted over his handlebars with Broadway flair. Another flopped dramatically onto the dust, limbs splayed like a Renaissance painting of martyrdom. A third spun in circles yelling "My leg! My leg!" though he appeared entirely fine.

Someone howled. Someone groaned. Someone whispered, "Why, bro… why?"

Matthew had braked just in time. He stood straddling his bike, frozen, mouth ajar, a Dorito crumb still stuck to his lip.

He looked around, aghast, the sole upright figure in a sea of moaning bodies and scattered bikes. It looked like the aftermath of a clown rodeo that had gone terribly wrong.

"Oh god," he said. "Oh no. I didn't—I didn't do anything!"

A girl in a sparkly jumpsuit clutched her shoulder and moaned, "You came out of nowhere, man."

"I—I was just biking!" Matthew stammered. "I didn't even touch anyone!"

A shirtless guy with aviator goggles writhed in the dust. "You clipped me, bro. You clipped me…"

Another cyclist crawled over, grabbed Matthew's ankle, and whispered, "Why'd you do it, man? Why?"

Matthew looked like a man watching his career flash before his eyes in interpretive dance form.

"Guys… I swear… I didn't even touch anyone!" he pleaded, hands in the air like he was being arrested by Cirque du Soleil.

And then —

A giggle.

A snort.

A snort that turned into a laugh. Then another. Then a full-bodied, dust-choked cackle from someone half-buried in their own bicycle.

One by one, the wounded began to rise.

The limp disappeared. The moaning stopped. Someone high-fived the "injured" guy. The girl with the sparkly jumpsuit dusted off her sequins and grinned.

"Welcome to Burning Man!" she said.

"We're the Playa Stunt Riders," added the guy with the goggles, bowing theatrically. "We do staged bike crashes for confused virgins. You were magnificent."

Matthew blinked.

"You… you pranked me?"

"Oh, we performance-arted you," said another, adjusting his tutu. "Consider it your dust baptism."

Someone handed him a sticker that read: I SURVIVED THE BICYCLE APOCALYPSE.

Matthew just stood there for a moment, dazed and grinning. Then he let out a huge, involuntary laugh — the kind that wipes your mental hard drive and replaces it with joy.

Later, he said it was the exact moment he stopped observing Burning Man… and started being Burning Man.

No Menu, Just Magic

A wish whispered, a gift returned.

It was Day Five on the playa, and the dust had found its way into everything — between pages of books, under fingernails, inside sealed Tupperware. At Black Rock Observatory, our beloved science-themed camp, we'd spent the last few days giving stargazing tours, running workshops, and inviting curious wanderers to peer at the cosmos through our telescopes. Saturn had wowed them all, of course, with its improbable rings hovering like a magician's trick. But by now, even the most enthusiastic of us were running on fumes.

The fridge was a graveyard. The fruit was long gone, the hummus had grown a questionable sheen, and the last of the fresh bread had gone to the birds — or to that mutant seagull someone built out of scrap metal and hubris. We were down to canned beans, stale crackers, and a bottle of hot sauce with an ominous crust.

I was tired. Dusted. And deeply, almost spiritually, hungry.

Not just any hunger, mind you — but a specific, all-consuming desire: I wanted a barbecue. Not a tofu skewer or a lukewarm veggie burger, but a proper meal — smoky, grilled, primal. I was craving charred meat, golden crackling, and ideally, a cold glass of white wine to wash it all down. I hadn't eaten like that in days. Hell, I hadn't dreamed like that in days.

Burning Man is built on the principle of Radical Self-Reliance — you bring what you need to survive. But no one tells you what to do when your stomach starts crafting Shakespearean soliloquies about roast chicken and chilled Chardonnay.

So I did the only sensible thing: I got on my bike and rode off into the heat, hoping art might distract me from appetite.

The playa has a strange way of playing tricks on your mind. I set out thinking I could distract myself with art, let wonder outweigh want. But the more I pedaled, the more the landscape taunted me — sculptures shaped like cinnamon rolls, towers that looked suspiciously like stacked loaves of bread, a dome made entirely of dried herbs. I swear someone had left a giant inflatable rotisserie chicken in front of their camp. It was all very Burning Man.

Still, the art did its job — it tugged me forward, deeper into the desert's dreamscape. I stopped at a kinetic installation where giant mirrors tilted with the wind, scattering shafts of sunlight like divine spotlights. I passed a quiet shrine built from bones and books, and a temple made of honeycomb-like wood panels, already etched with messages of grief and hope.

But it wasn't until twilight bled into indigo that I found myself drawn irresistibly, almost magnetically, to the Tree of Ténéré.

It stood out there on the open playa like something that had rooted itself between worlds. A towering steel-and-silicone sculpture, it was inspired by the real Tree of Ténéré — once the most isolated tree on Earth, a lone acacia that stood in the vast expanse of the Sahara, hundreds of miles from its nearest neighbor. That tree had been a symbol of resilience, of improbable life. And like its namesake, this installation felt sacred.

But unlike the original, this one was made of light.

As darkness deepened, the tree came alive — not with leaves, but with 175,000 shimmering LED blossoms, each flickering in patterns triggered by touch and proximity. People gathered at its base, brushing their hands against the branches, watching colors ripple outward in response. It glowed in mesmerizing waves — electric blues, warm ambers, pulses of violet and white, like neurons firing across the nervous system of a dreaming planet.

It didn't just light up the playa. It lit something up in you. Some unspoken longing for connection, for beauty, for the inexplicable found its reflection there.

I stood beneath it longer than I meant to, half-forgetting my hunger. But not for long. The sight may have been sublime, but my stomach remained stubbornly mortal.

So I turned my bike back toward camp, the sky now fully night, my belly echoing with its original plea: barbecue and wine, please — anything but cold beans and broken crackers.

And that, of course, is when the real magic began.

By the time I made it back to Black Rock Observatory, the playa had transformed. The air had cooled, the wind had calmed, and the desert sky shimmered with a billion stars — no light pollution, no skyscrapers, just the universe in full panoramic theatre. Our telescopes were already pointed

skyward, a small group of Burners huddled nearby, gasping as Saturn revealed its rings, and Jupiter its moons.

But I had stars of a different sort in my eyes — the kind that swirl when your blood sugar is plummeting and your body starts imagining meals that don't exist.

I was dusty, delirious, and ready to commit acts of minor violence for a grilled sausage.

And that's when I heard it — a voice from across the street, booming and benevolent:

"Hey you! Hungry?"

I looked up, and there he was — a hulking figure dressed in furs, with a plaited beard and a grin that could light up a Viking funeral pyre. He was standing outside Camp Valhalla.

Now, Camp Valhalla wasn't just a themed camp — it was an institution. Known for its Viking aesthetic, they built elaborate feasting halls from reclaimed wood, rolled in on a dragon-headed mutant vehicle that doubled as a mobile mead hall, and hosted nightly storytelling sessions fueled by fermented things and thunderous laughter. I'd admired them in passing, always assuming they were too epic, too established, too… well, sorted to have room for the likes of me.

But this Norseman was waving me over like I was a long-lost shield brother.

"We're having a roast! Full pig. Wild rice. Spiced veg. You're just in time."

Time slowed. My ears rang. My jaw may have dropped.

He didn't ask what I had to trade. He didn't want my LED trinkets or dusty bottle of gin. He just gestured toward the table — long, candlelit, half-covered in platters of food that looked like they'd been summoned by Odin himself.

And there, nestled between a golden roast pig — its skin crisp and glistening — and a mound of wild rice flecked with herbs and pine nuts, was a bottle of white wine, already open, droplets of condensation still clinging to the glass.

It was everything I had been dreaming of. Exactly. Down to the bloody wine.

I nearly wept.

I crossed the dust with reverence, half in disbelief, half in delirium. The table at Camp Valhalla felt like something out of myth — a scene from a lost Norse saga, reimagined through LED torches, reclaimed oak, and impeccable burner flair.

The pig — or what remained of it — rested on a massive wooden platter, its flanks carved open, steaming gently in the desert air. It had been slow-roasted over coals since dawn, basted with herbs and garlic, and stuffed with fennel and citrus. The crackling shattered under a fork. The meat melted in the mouth. Every bite tasted like home, like wilderness, like something deeply ancestral.

There were bowls of wild rice with toasted almonds and dried cranberries. Charred root vegetables drizzled with olive oil and coarse salt. A cast-iron pot of tangy purple cabbage braised with apples and cloves. And somehow — impossibly — there was cold white wine. Chilled. Crisp. Floral on the nose, sharp on the tongue, and utterly divine.

No barter. No strings. Just a place set for me, a plate handed to me, and refills offered before I could even ask.

I sat between a woman named Freya (because of course she was) who had been coming to the Burn for ten years and a soft-spoken man in chainmail who said nothing for twenty minutes, then recited a perfect poem about entropy. Conversation flowed like the wine — tales of other years, other camps, strange happenings out beyond the trash fence. Laughter rang out, unforced and generous.

There was no sense of transaction, no expectation. It was, in the purest sense, a gift — one that transcended material exchange. Radical Inclusion welcomed me without hesitation. Gifting offered sustenance and joy without price. Decommodification stripped the experience of branding or ego. It was just people… feeding people. Because they could. Because they wanted to. Because someone else had done the same for them once.

I didn't try to repay them. That wasn't the point. The gift isn't meant to be returned to the giver — it's meant to keep circulating. To be passed on, expanded, transformed.

And in that moment, somewhere between the pork belly and the second glass of wine, I realized: this was it. This was Playa Magic. The very idea that the universe — or some dusty approximation of it — hears your need and answers not with efficiency, but with art and abundance.

I had asked for fire and feast. The playa gave me a banquet and a brotherhood.

Later that night, back at Black Rock Observatory, I lay beneath the stars with the taste of smoke still on my tongue and a quiet warmth in my chest. I hadn't begged, bartered, or planned. I had simply hoped — and somehow, the playa had answered.

This is what they mean when they say the Playa Provides. Not because it's magic, exactly, but because when thousands of people come together with generosity in their hearts, improbable things become inevitable. Needs are met, not through commerce, but through kindness. Desires are fulfilled, not on demand, but by some strange synchronicity that exists only in this pocket of radical possibility.

You can't count on it. But you can believe in it.

And so I do.

Interstellar Emissary

When the stars align on the playa, sometimes they wear cotton.

Sometimes the desert lines up the universe just for you.

It was our first year camping with Black Rock Observatory, the volunteer-run camp that sets up telescopes, meteorites, and space science talks for anyone curious enough to wander in off the playa. Lara and I had pulled the late shift — 11 o'clock at the dome, somewhere halfway between the Temple and the trash fence. On a map, that sounded simple. On the playa at night, it meant we were basically hunting for a cosmic needle in a dust-stormed haystack.

We set out on our bikes, following vague instructions like "turn right after the glowing jellyfish, then left at the giant hammock," weaving between art cars and neon-lit wanderers. We passed a roller-skating conga line, a guy in a top hat offering "free bad advice," and a woman playing cello on top of a moving pirate ship. Every landmark we tried to use moved before we could reach it.

Eventually, a dim ochre dome rose out of the darkness. Inside, a handful of Burners milled about, gazing through the telescopes. One of our campmates greeted us, then promptly handed me a chunk of the universe: a hefty meteorite, a large fragment of the Campo del Cielo — a lump of iron and nickel that had been flying through space for four billion years before crash-landing in Argentina.

The meteorite was dense and cold in my hands, its pitted surface glinting faintly in the dome's soft light. It had been part of an asteroid that broke apart somewhere between Mars and Jupiter, wandering the solar system for eons before a piece of it hurtled through Earth's atmosphere and slammed into what's now northern Argentina around 4,000 years ago. Local legends say the fragments fell from the heavens during a battle between gods — a story that feels perfectly at home on the playa.

I was mid-way through telling its story — ancient stardust, planetary collisions, fiery descent — when *she* appeared.

Julia. Playa name: *Stardust Valkyrie*.

She was the kind of woman who looked like she could lead an army or seduce a god. Tall, athletic, with sun-bronzed skin, knee-high desert boots, and long braided hair swinging like comet tails. Her profile was pure sculpture — a Phidian nose and Praxitelean beauty, all harmonious lines and timeless grace, as if carved from marble but set loose to walk the dust. A modern-day Helen of Troy in the desert, she had the kind of presence that could launch a thousand mutant vehicles. Her eyes locked on the meteorite, and for a second, I swear it pulsed in my hands.

"May I?" she asked.

I handed it over, and she cradled it like an infant. Eyes closed, she inhaled deeply. "I can feel it," she whispered. "The energy of the cosmos."

Then, without another word, she turned and began walking into the open playa, meteorite in hand.

I scrambled after her. "Uh, hi, sorry, that's… not actually mine to give away."

She kept walking, boots crunching over the dust. And that's when we saw it: in the near-distance, a disc of golden light, hovering like a signal from another civilization.

The Interstellar Emissary glowed in slow, hypnotic pulses, five meters across, its edge traced in color-shifting LEDs that faded from deep-space blue to Martian red to the golden warmth of a rising sun. Suspended in the dark like an alien signal buoy, it was an almost-perfect replica of the Voyager Golden Record — the 12-inch gold-plated copper disc launched aboard NASA's Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecraft in 1977.

In real life, those records carry the story of our species — 116 images etched in analogue form: DNA helices, the anatomy of the human body, mathematical definitions, and photographs of life on Earth. Alongside them, a soundscape of our planet: greetings in 55 languages (from Akkadian to Wu Chinese), a child's laughter, the music of Bach and Chuck Berry, the rush of wind, the roll of thunder, the beating of a human heart. A gift for any civilization — now or millions of years in the future — that might stumble upon it, drifting endlessly through interstellar space.

Here, on the playa, the Emissary reimagined that gift. It whispered those same sounds into the cool desert air — whale song weaving into the crash of waves, the crackle of fire, the voice of a woman saying in Arabic: *"Greetings to*

our friends in the stars. We wish you peace and happiness." Ghostly images shimmered and dissolved: human faces, chemical formulas, a newborn baby, a woman licking an ice cream cone. It was like the universe had handed us its most intimate mixtape.

I was about to comment to Julia on the eerie beauty of it when a single white beam cut across the dark. A lone cyclist emerged from the nothingness, his bike tires humming softly over the dust. He slowed to a crawl, staring up at the disc with the wide-eyed intensity of someone who has just found a secret door in reality.

"No way… no way… no. Way." His voice was half-whisper, half-laugh, like he didn't trust what he was seeing.

Julia tilted her head. "Is that… the artist?"

The man didn't answer. He hopped off his bike, still muttering, and began unbuttoning his shirt. Out here, that can go in any number of directions, most of them involving glitter. But instead of stripping down to a tutu or full body paint, he revealed a black T-shirt — printed with the *exact* etching from the Voyager Golden Record. Down to the smallest engraved diagrams of hydrogen atoms and pulsar positions, it was an exact twin of the glowing disc in front of us.

Julia gasped and took a step toward him. "It's you! You made this!"

He laughed, shaking his head. "What? No! I just bought this shirt online years ago. I'm camping way over by 2:15 and was heading home. Then… I see this. I mean… what are the odds?"

We stood there for a moment, three strangers lit by the light of an interstellar calling card, caught in that rare, impossible symmetry when art, life, and timing align perfectly.

Julia passed the meteorite from one hand to the other, still watching him. "You have to admit… this is kind of cosmic."

He grinned. "Yeah. Feels like the universe just high-fived me."

We ended up talking for ten more minutes — about Voyager's journey, about whether anyone will ever find the record, about how strange and wonderful it is that a human-made object is now farther from Earth than anything else

we've ever built. Then, with a wave, he pedaled off into the darkness, his little headlamp shrinking into the distance like a star receding into deep space.

That's the thing about Burning Man: it's a place where the improbable feels inevitable, where chance meetings feel choreographed. Out here, those moments of uncanny alignment — the ones that would be once-in-a-lifetime anywhere else — happen so often they have their own name. We call it "playadipity."

And that night, under a glowing message meant for the stars, holding a rock older than Earth itself, I couldn't help but think… maybe the stars had answered back.

The Wish Whisperer

When a river rock delivers more than words

It was the kind of afternoon when even the dust gave up. The sun hung high and unmerciful, turning the playa into a bleached mirage of stillness and shimmer. Our camp, Black Rock Observatory, was a graveyard of half-melted humans. No one spoke. No one moved. A lone tarp flapped intermittently in the dry breeze, its beat irregular and faintly judgmental.

Someone lay draped over a folding chair like spilled laundry. Another had slid halfway out of a hammock and hadn't bothered to fix it. Even the wind seemed too hot to care. In the distance, a mutant vehicle let out a low, mournful groan and rolled on, trailing an apathetic plume of dust behind it.

And in the corner—crumpled, lifeless, possibly deceased—was Major Tom.

Still dressed in the remnants of whatever questionable adventure he'd had the night before, Tom was a cautionary tale in human form. His goggles were askew, his shirt unbuttoned just enough to suggest surrender, and his entire posture screamed "never again"… although we all knew better.

No one had the energy to ask if he was okay. We just assumed he was recharging. Or rebooting. Or both.

The whole camp was in a collective state of evaporated ambition. Nothing was going to happen.

Which, of course, is when something did.

It happened the way things often do on the playa—suddenly, without warning, as though the desert had decided to stage a scene. One moment we were half-asleep in the heat, the next she was there.

She didn't stumble in like the rest of us, dust-blind and disoriented. She moved with purpose, cutting through the shimmer as if the sun had parted just for her. Drop-dead gorgeous, radiant, impossible to ignore—she seemed too vivid for the washed-out palette of our camp. In a world bleached to beige, she was full color.

She stopped just inside the shade line, eyes scanning us with a calm certainty. No hesitation. No small talk.

"Is there a Major Tom here?" she asked.

Silence. A collective blink. Suspicion, curiosity, the faint stirrings of energy in bodies that had been limp minutes before.

A couple of us looked around uncertainly, then, slowly, heads turned toward the crumpled heap in the corner.

Major Tom didn't move.

But the game was up.

For a moment no one spoke, the question hanging in the heat like a hallucination. Finally, she broke the silence.

"I'm looking for him," she said, pointing gently toward the heap in the corner. "Major Tom."

Tom made a vague sound—something between a groan and a sigh—but didn't lift his head.

She smiled, as if this confirmed everything. "I was at the Wishing Well earlier today," she continued. "You know the one—where you write your wish on a river rock, your name and camp on the other side, and drop it in the shallow well? Anyone who passes by can pick up a wish and try to make it real."

We nodded. We all knew it. A quirky little playa ritual. Write your longing on a stone, toss it in, and hope that somewhere in the chaos, someone stumbles across it and decides to play fairy god-burner.

She held up a small smooth rock, words still faintly visible in marker. One side simply read: "A massage."

The other side: "Major Tom, Black Rock Observatory."

She looked back at him, still motionless in the corner. Then she knelt, set the rock down beside him like a sacred offering, and said matter-of-factly:

"So here I am."

From the corner came a low groan, the sound of a man trying to reboot his operating system with half a battery left. Major Tom cracked one eye open.

"Wait… what?" he croaked.

The girl just nodded, calm and unwavering. "You wished for a massage," she said simply.

Two of us exchanged looks, then leaned in to haul him upright. He resisted at first, like a man being dragged into consciousness against his will, but eventually he slumped forward into something resembling a seated position. His goggles slid down his nose. His hair looked like it had lost an argument with gravity.

He blinked at her. "You're serious?"

She smiled—gentle, amused, but entirely earnest. "I'm serious."

And then, without ceremony, she stepped behind him and began.

Her hands pressed into his shoulders, firm and practiced. At first Tom tensed, suspicious, almost offended by the kindness. But then the knots gave way. His head dropped. A sigh escaped, long and grateful. Slowly, visibly, he melted—this time not from heat or exhaustion, but from sheer, blissful relief.

The rest of us gathered closer, drawn in by the spectacle. Dusty, wide-eyed, half-smiling, we watched Major Tom resurrect under the touch of a stranger who had plucked his wish from a pile of rocks and carried it across the city.

It was absurd. And perfect.

For a while no one said anything. We just stood there, half-shaded, half-baked, watching Major Tom dissolve under her hands like butter on hot concrete. The silence was broken when someone muttered, deadpan, "I need to go write a new wish."

That cracked the spell. Another voice piped up, grinning: "You see? The playa provides."

Laughter rippled through the camp, soft at first, then louder, rising like a breeze through the tarp. Shoulders relaxed. Faces opened. Even the heat felt different—still scorching, still merciless, but somehow bearable now, as if the desert had relented just a little.

What minutes earlier had been a scene of collapse and inertia was suddenly something else: a reminder that in Black Rock City, wishes don't just vanish

into dust. Sometimes they circle back. Sometimes they walk straight into camp in broad daylight, radiant and real.

And for that afternoon at least, we all believed.

When it was over, she rose lightly, brushed the dust from her hands, and smiled. No payment, no explanation. She just picked up the little river rock, slipped it back into her bag, and walked out the way she had come—into the white shimmer of the horizon.

By the time we looked up again, she was gone.

Some said she was a mirage. Others swore she was real. But the loosened knots in Major Tom's back were proof enough.

The Last Ride of the Killer Whale

A desert whale leads to laughter, conflict, and a tiny gift that lasts forever.

The year was 2017. It was my first AfrikaBurn.

AfrikaBurn is an official regional event in the global Burning Man network and, at around 11,000 attendees, it is the largest regional burn—though still small in scale compared with the nearly 80,000 who gather in Black Rock City each year. Set in the Tankwa Karoo, and likely even more secluded than Nevada's Black Rock Desert, its harsh semi-desert plains stretch outward in quiet, dusty solitude.

There are palpable similarities—both burns live by the ten principles (radical self-expression, gifting, leaving no trace, and so on)—yet AfrikaBurn added an eleventh in 2014: "Each One Teach One", a principle that encourages passing knowledge to newcomers and feels especially resonant when interacting with first-time burners. The crowd in South Africa skews younger, with a higher number of people in their twenties and thirties, compared to a slightly older distribution at Burning Man. The atmosphere, too, leans more lovey-dovey and hippy—there isn't much of a pranking culture or techno-fueled mischief often found in Black Rock City.

And the art reflects that sensibility. At AfrikaBurn, installations—while impressive—feel earthy, lovingly mortal, as though crafted by hands in the soil. At Black Rock City, by contrast, the art often feels like it descended from the heavens—gigantic, godlike projects, engineered to awe and astonish.

I rolled into my camp expecting a hive of activity, only to find the place looking like a field hospital. My campmates weren't battling dust storms or desert heat—they were fighting a stomach bug. Bodies were sprawled across sofas and cots, groaning softly, clinging to water bottles as if they were life rafts. A few whispered about ginger tea, others muttered karmic explanations, but no one had the strength to move, let alone venture into the Binnekring—the great open circle where the art glows, the music throbs, and the burn truly comes alive.

So, when the sun began to slip beneath the desert horizon, painting the Karoo sky in bruised purples and fire-streaked orange, I set out alone.

The desert at night was something else. Like the playa in Nevada, the Karoo transformed into a dreamscape. The stars burned brighter in the southern hemisphere—so bright they didn't just shine, they hummed. Basslines rolled across the desert like distant thunder. Scattered LEDs flickered on the horizon, like constellations rearranged by mischievous gods. Laughter floated across the darkness, inviting and untraceable.

The Tankwa Karoo at night is a stark contrast to the Black Rock playa. The playa is flat, powdery, and deceptive—an endless white canvas that tricks the eye into believing distances are shorter than they are. The Karoo, on the other hand, is rugged, stony, and deeply silent between bursts of music. The ground crunches underfoot, uneven and cracked, as if it has endured centuries of sun without mercy. There are no dust storms here, no blinding white-outs—just dry, baked earth stretching into a horizon that feels untouched by time.

Yet both landscapes, in their own way, invite transformation. The playa feels lunar, alien, like you've left Earth altogether. The Karoo feels ancient, primordial—as if the world itself were still forming, and you had stumbled into its early draft.

Wandering with no destination, I came across it—a giant inflatable killer whale, beached in the dust like some strange dream. A crowd had gathered around it.. Several people had clambered on top, bouncing and sliding as though they were riding a cosmic playground ride. There was no order, no instruction, no permission asked or given—just the spontaneous eruption of joy. They were shrieking with laughter, collapsing into each other, limbs tangled, faces lit up with the kind of wild abandon most of us left behind in childhood. It was ridiculous and perfect. The whale buckled slightly under their weight, swaying as they whooped and tumbled, like some sacred totem of silliness.

And watching them, something stirred in me. It wasn't envy—it was recognition. The unfiltered joy, the play for play's sake, the giddy nonsense of it all. It was like stepping into a lucid dream or a waking hallucination where fun had no consequences and laughter had no edges. There were no phones, no social contracts, no spectators—just pure, participatory delight.

It struck me then that this—this ridiculous, magnificent scene—was the spirit of the Burn. Burning Man, Africa Burn, all of them—they're not just festivals. They're living playgrounds for the soul. Disneyland for adults, yes—but with fewer fences, fewer rules, and far more wonder. Here, art isn't cordoned off;

it's climbed on. Joy isn't rationed; it's shared. Every ridiculous moment has the potential to become sacred.

And for a few breathless minutes, under the glittering expanse of the Milky Way, I forgot I was an adult. I forgot I was alone. I was simply there, basking in the raucous joy of strangers on a giant inflatable whale, and everything felt right with the world.

But then, from the shadows, came a very different energy.

A woman burst out of the darkness, storming toward the whale. Her voice was sharp, her rage electric.

"What the fuck are you doing?! Get the fuck down! I'm not even kidding! This is not for climbing!"

Everyone froze. The people on the whale began sliding off sheepishly, trying to laugh it off, trying to explain. She wasn't having it. Her fury was palpable, and entirely unambiguous. She paced furiously in front of the whale, then had to run around the back, yelling at another group still bouncing on top, oblivious to the situation.

It turned out she was the creator of the installation. The whale, she explained, was meant to be observed, not ridden. And in that moment, the vibe shifted completely—from wonder to discomfort. The space felt heavy, the magic cracked.

Just minutes earlier, it had been a playground of joy—a carnival of laughter echoing across the desert night, where strangers became children and the ridiculous became sublime. But now, the energy had drained from the scene. People shuffled awkwardly, unsure whether to apologize or disappear. Conversations dropped to whispers. The group that had once swarmed the whale like delighted dolphins now quietly peeled away, one by one, like party guests who'd overstayed their welcome.

In a matter of minutes, the entire area felt hollow. What had been alive with lightness and spontaneity now seemed stripped bare—vacant, both physically and emotionally. The laughter had evaporated. The LED lights dimmed in comparison to the chill that had settled in. Even the whale itself, still gently wobbling from the last climber's descent, looked a little forlorn, like a deflated joke or a misunderstood gesture.

The desert swallowed the sound, and the stars looked on in silence.

And so, I walked away.

I drifted through the night a while longer—visited a few other installations, stared up at the dazzling sprawl of the galaxy, let the stillness soak in. But my thoughts kept circling back to that whale. The joy it had sparked, the drama that followed, and how abruptly enchantment can shatter.

Eventually, curiosity pulled me back.

This time, the scene was completely different. Silent. Desolate. The crowd was gone, the laughter vanished. Just one man stood next to the whale, slowly deflating it. I approached him and said, "Hey man… I don't think you should be doing that."

He looked up and smiled. "It's okay," he said. "I'm the creator."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? Because earlier there was a girl yelling at everyone. She said she was the creator."

He chuckled. "Yeah. We're a couple. We made it together. But people kept climbing on it, and… they didn't get it. So we're packing it up."

I nodded. "That makes sense. But you know, at Burning Man, installations are usually interactive. People assume they're meant to be played with. It's part of the ethos—touch the art, become the art, participate."

He nodded slowly, smiling. "Yeah… I get that."

We stood in silence for a moment as the orca slowly deflated, its grand form softening into the dust.

The next morning, back at camp, I told the story to my still-recovering campmates. They loved it—found it hilarious, surreal, perfectly 'burny.' We laughed about the angry artist, the whale riders, the absurdity of it all.

That evening, they went out to the Binnekring. I stayed behind to rest.

When they returned, they brought me a gift.

A tiny inflatable killer whale.

They'd found it randomly at one of the camps they visited and thought of me instantly. It was the perfect, serendipitous echo of the night before. One of those playa-dipitous moments you can't plan—only receive.

And ever since, I've carried that baby orca with me to every Burn. A reminder of that night. Of the joy, the rage, the confusion, and the magic. Of how, at burns, meaning often hides in the ridiculous. And how sometimes, the universe sends you a tiny plastic whale just to say, "Hey. You're on the right path."

High Drama on the Dragon

An exit worthy of a standing ovation.

At Burning Man, the term *art car* doesn't really do justice to what rumbles across the playa at night. These aren't just vehicles with a few quirky decorations. They're rolling sculptures, roving nightclubs, and surreal mechanical beasts that look like they've driven straight out of someone's fever dream. Officially called *mutant vehicles*, they're transformed so completely you can barely tell they were ever buses, trucks, or golf carts in the first place.

Some are intimate — a sofa on wheels, a tiny tea room trundling through the dust. Others are massive, multi-story ships with booming sound systems and dance floors that sway with the beat. *El Pulpo Mecanico* — a towering, fire-breathing octopus — can light up the playa with a dozen flame jets in perfect time to the music. *The Mayan Warrior*, a mobile DJ stage covered in intricate Aztec-inspired panels and armed with lasers powerful enough to touch the mountains, can draw thousands of Burners into its orbit. There's *The Rhino Redemption*, a glowing steel rhinoceros with a lounge hidden in its belly; *The Piano Bar*, a grand piano on wheels serving cocktails and singalongs; *Abraxas*, the shimmering golden dragon that snakes across the dust breathing light and smoke; and *The Steampunk Octopus Submarine*, which looks exactly like it sounds — equal parts Jules Verne and fever dream. Some pulse like nightclubs, others glide in near-silence, carrying passengers on slow, dreamlike voyages under the stars.

Mutant vehicles are part transport, part performance, part playground. And on the right night, they're the best seat in the galaxy.

That night, I'd found myself aboard *Abraxas*, the golden dragon. Even at rest, it shimmered — hundreds of metal scales catching the light from nearby installations, its long neck arcing overhead like it was scanning the horizon for prey. The body of the dragon was a dance floor, big enough for a small crowd to sway with the bass, and the tail unfurled into a cozy lounge where you could sprawl on cushions and watch the playa glide by.

The air was warm but edged with that late-night desert chill, the kind that makes you glad for the body heat of a dancing crowd. A DJ hidden somewhere in the dragon's belly was spinning a deep, hypnotic set — the

kind of music that turns the night into one continuous pulse. Around me, strangers grinned at each other as though we were all in on some enormous secret. Drinks were passed, hands met in high fives, and the dragon rumbled forward, breathing low plumes of theatrical smoke into the dark.

From up here, the playa felt like a dreamscape in motion — other art cars glowing and gliding past, lasers combing the sky, the distant outline of the Temple standing silent in contrast to all the noise and color. It was one of those perfect Burning Man nights… right up until *he* appeared.

He clambered aboard from the back platform — slow, deliberate, almost uncertain of his footing. At first glance, he looked like someone who had accidentally wandered into the wrong party: stooped shoulders, weathered face half-hidden behind dusty goggles, a battered wide-brim hat that had seen better decades. His coat hung loose and heavy, the kind you'd imagine on a prospector in an old Western, and it flapped slightly in the breeze as he shuffled forward.

At first, nobody paid him much attention. This was Burning Man — strangers drift in and out of your orbit constantly. But then he stumbled, catching himself against a railing, and a ripple of awareness moved through the crowd. A woman near me shot him a worried look. Someone else leaned over and asked if he was okay. He didn't answer.

Instead, he started moving around the deck with a distracted air, like he was looking for something but couldn't quite remember what it was. He picked up a stray cup, turned it over in his hand, and set it down again. He leaned out over the railing for a little too long, peering into the dark, then swayed backward with a jerky step. Conversations began to fade. The dancing thinned out. People edged away, giving him space.

Then he did something that made every eye on the dragon lock to him — he grabbed the rail and began to climb onto the *side* of the art car.

At first, people thought he was just adjusting his position — maybe trying to sit on the edge for a better view. But then one boot planted on the narrow side rail, then the other. Now he was standing there, swaying slightly, the black void of the playa yawning beyond him.

Shouts cut through the music.

"Hey, man, get down!"

"Careful!"

"Dude, that's not safe!"

The DJ caught sight of him and instinctively pulled the volume down, the bass fading into a nervous murmur of voices. Even the dragon's slow roll seemed to hesitate. In the sudden quiet, the only sounds were the wind and the creak of the metal under his boots.

He was framed in the glow of Abraxas' lights, his silhouette etched against the darkness. His arms spread slightly as if for balance. He glanced down — not at the ground, but at us. It was hard to tell through the goggles, but there was something unreadable in that look.

"Please," someone called, their voice tight. "Just… step back."

He shifted his weight, the rail wobbling under him. A collective gasp went up. A man near me started forward, hands out, ready to grab him if he tipped. I caught myself holding my breath, my chest tight, waiting for whatever came next.

For a heartbeat, it felt like the entire playa was holding its breath with us. The wind carried a faint echo of distant music from somewhere far off, but up here on the dragon, everything was still.

Then he bent his knees slightly — just enough to shift the balance. A tiny adjustment, almost imperceptible, except for the way the crowd's collective gasp seemed to tighten.

And then, in one clean, fluid motion, he pushed off.

It happened so fast the mind couldn't keep up: the arc of his body against the dark, the glint of his boots catching the light mid-air, the slow rotation that wasn't slow at all. A perfect, gymnast's backflip — the kind you'd see in an Olympic replay, not from a man who looked like he'd shuffled straight out of a frontier saloon.

Gasps turned into shouts. People rushed to the rail, craning to see. My own hands were gripping the metal so hard my knuckles ached, expecting to witness a disaster in the dust.

But instead, he landed…perfectly — in a small cloud of powdery playa, knees soft, balance steady, like gravity had agreed to give him a pass.

For a few seconds, no one spoke. From above, all we could see was the churned-up dust around him and the faint outline of his hat.

"Is he… okay?" someone whispered.

Then he straightened — not like someone recovering from a fall, but like someone finishing a performance. He brushed the dust from his coat, reached up, and tugged at the brim of his hat. Off it came, followed by the goggles, then a wiry grey wig that came away in one practiced motion.

The old man vanished before our eyes. In his place stood a young, grinning guy with the compact build of a gymnast — the kind of body made for flips, not for shuffling around like a prospector on his last legs.

For a split second, there was silence again as the truth settled over us. Then laughter broke out across the deck — sharp, delighted, incredulous. Someone clapped. Someone else shouted, "You got us!"

He gave a small theatrical bow, then turned and jogged away into the darkness, swallowed by the playa in a matter of seconds.

Within moments, he was gone — no trace except a few footprints in the dust and the ripple of laughter still moving through the crowd. The DJ slowly brought the music back, basslines rolling in like nothing had happened, but we all knew we'd just witnessed something better than the setlist.

That's the thing about Burning Man: danger and theatre often walk the same tightrope, and out here, you never quite know which side you're looking at until the mask comes off. Pranks aren't just jokes; they're little disruptions, moments that jolt you awake and remind you you're in a place where the script can be ripped up at any time.

Later, someone swore he was part of a loose crew of "playa stunt" performers — people who spend the week pulling off elaborate set pieces designed to fool just long enough to turn panic into pure delight. I have no idea if that's true.

What I do know is that on a golden dragon somewhere in Black Rock City, an old man who wasn't old flipped backwards into the dust and vanished — leaving us with one more story we'd be telling for years.

Dust, Deception, and Daft Punk

The greatest gig that never was

It started like so many things on the playa do — not with certainty, but with suggestion. A passing comment. A scribble on a whiteboard near Centre Camp. A wink from a sparkle pony in a Daft Punk helmet.

"Thursday night. Trash Fence. Daft Punk."

That was it. No time, no art car, no coordinates. Just a whisper — and yet it travelled faster than any radio signal could in Black Rock City. You'd hear it over coffee at the French Quarter. Again, while queuing for a grilled cheese at the Grilled Cheese Incident. Someone had heard from someone who swore that this year, Daft Punk really was playing a secret sunrise set at the Trash Fence.

And of course, there were the posters. Glorious, laminated, laser-printed lies — stuck to lampposts and message boards across the city. "DAFT PUNK – One Night Only – Deep Playa – Thursday at Midnight." Some even had QR codes and faux holograms. It was the kind of mischief that seasoned Burners recognized instantly — prank-as-art, part of the grand theatre of the desert.

But not everyone knew the joke.

Newbies, sparkle ponies, and bucket-list Burners fell for it hard. You could spot them a mile away — wide-eyed, bandanas tight, LED accessories at full brightness, clutching cans of Monster and high expectations. They wanted to believe. They needed to believe.

Because out here, logic has no jurisdiction. The dust bends reality, distorts doubt. And the more people denied it, the more real it became.

By Tuesday evening, the city was humming with anticipation. By Wednesday, the rumor was gospel. By Thursday night, the pilgrimage had begun — mutant vehicles gliding like mechanical beasts toward the edge of the world, speakers blaring "One More Time," passengers whooping into the void, chasing a sonic mirage.

No one could say where the rumor started.

But everyone could tell you exactly where it was going.

Like many things on the playa, Daft Punk at the Trash Fence didn't begin as a performance. It began as a prank — a glorious, dust-fueled, wide-eyed bit of mischief. The kind that takes root in the cracked alkali soil of Black Rock City and, before long, blooms into myth.

The very first spark came in 2009, when a cheeky camp called Neu Verboten submitted a line to the official WhatWhereWhen guide:

"Daft Punk and Kraftwerk at the Trash Fence."

No time. No address. Just that.

A perfect bit of deadpan absurdity — and enough to light a fire.

The idea took hold, murmured from Burner to Burner, year after year. Some chased it. Others repeated it with a smirk. Slowly, it became tradition. And then in 2015, it detonated — thanks to a Burner named Tucker Gomberg, aka The Festival Guy.

Frustrated by the creeping rise of VIP culture at festivals — exclusivity wristbands, roped-off lounges, Very Important People — he decided to gift the playa a delicious piece of satire.

So, he printed 2,000 orange VIP wristbands, each stamped with the words:

"Daft Punk @ The Trash Fence."

He handed them out to unsuspecting Burners with solemn winks and hushed tones of importance. The reaction? Electric. People wept. They clutched their wristbands like Wonka's golden ticket. Some even tried to present them at sound camps like they were credentials for backstage entry.

But the kicker? There was no show. No helmeted Frenchmen. No stage. Just the idea. And that was enough. The rumor took flight and circled the city like a dust devil made of pure wishful thinking.

By the time Burning Man 2016 rolled around, the prank had evolved. Tucker returned with renewed mischief — more posters, more hype — and a gnawing question: What if we actually did it? What if Daft Punk did play the Trash Fence — not the real Daft Punk, of course, but something close enough to break the playa?

So in 2017, the myth broke the fourth wall.

Tucker assembled a team. He crowdfunded. He bought a replica chrome Daft Punk helmet from a factory in Mexico. He enlisted a pair of DJs — known in their own right — to play the roles. And like a vision from a desert fever dream, they did it.

Somewhere out in the far-flung fringes of Black Rock City, beneath stars burning cold and dust whipping across LED-lit goggles, an art car lit up the night. Music pulsed. A crowd formed. And Daft Punk — or something like them — played the Trash Fence.

Was it them? Of course not.

Did it matter? Not in the slightest.

Because in that moment, the prank became real. The joke became ritual. And thousands of Burners danced not to the beat of robots, but to the rhythm of belief, participation, and playa magic.

By the late 2010s, Daft Punk at the Trash Fence had outgrown its prankster roots and blossomed into a full-blown Burning Man phenomenon.

Every year, the rumor would reawaken — like a sleeper cell of mischief — revived by whispers, posters, and last-minute "exclusive" invites. Some years, it was just a rumor. Others, it became an elaborate performance — complete with helmeted DJs, pulsating lights, and throngs of eager Burners chasing the sonic mirage.

But then came the year of the dueling Daft Punks.

In true playa fashion, two separate art cars — each unaware of the other — decided to stage the Daft Punk comeback show at the very same time. Each had replica helmets. Each had lights, live mixes, and hyped-up MCs insisting they were hosting the real Trash Fence event.

And so, as the sun dipped below the horizon, dust swirling like theatre curtains, Burners found themselves in the absurd position of choosing between two simultaneous Daft Punk sets — each claiming legitimacy. Some danced halfway between the two, ping-ponging back and forth.

Others picked a side, swearing theirs was the "original." One camp even reportedly chanted, "Accept no imitations!" at the other — which, of course, yelled back, "You're the imitation!"

It was meta, glorious, and entirely fitting.

This kind of joyful chaos is precisely what keeps the myth alive. Tucker's orange wristbands — distributed in their thousands — only added fuel to the fire, becoming prized artefacts for those "in the know." Meanwhile, LED posters and GPS coordinates would appear like desert mirages, promising timed performances no one could quite confirm.

The Trash Fence, once a wind-blocking border for the city, became a site of shared pilgrimage. A canvas for collective illusion. A place where performance, prank, and possibility blurred into one.

Daft Punk didn't need to show up.

The idea of them had become enough — a co-created fiction Burners could dance into existence.

Even today, the legend lives on — perhaps stronger than ever.

Every year, wide-eyed first-timers arrive at Black Rock City and stumble upon a cryptic flyer, a whispered rumor, or a glowing poster promising that this is the year Daft Punk will play a secret sunrise set at the Trash Fence. You can see the spark in their eyes — that cocktail of disbelief and hope that maybe, just maybe, it's true.

And then there are the veteran Burners, seasoned by dust and decade, who lean in with solemn nods and say things like, "You haven't heard? It's happening tonight. 3am. Trash Fence. Full pyramid stage."

They'll even offer you directions. "Head due east. Past the temple. If you hit the portapotties, you've gone too far. Look for a guy in a shark costume — he'll guide you the rest of the way."

And so, like pilgrims chasing a mirage, they set off — often in small groups — trekking through the playa dust, fueled by music, wonder, and the sheer poetry of possibility.

By the time they arrive, there may be an art car. There may be music. There may be nothing at all.

But somehow, it doesn't matter.

Because by then, they've become part of the joke. Part of the ritual. Part of the story.

That's the magic of Burning Man. The line between reality and myth isn't just blurred — it's danced upon.

The Trash Fence prank is no longer about Daft Punk. It's about believing in something improbable, and letting that belief carry you to the edge of the city — and maybe a little further.

It's about saying yes to the absurd.

And that, in the end, might be the most Burner thing of all.

The Real Dealer

In the land of dust and deception, not everything is as illicit as it seems.

Some people prepare for Burning Man by crafting costumes, soldering EL wire, or rigging solar showers. I, however, had a different kind of preparation in mind.

Weeks before the Burn, while stocking up on the usual supplies — goggles, dust masks, hydration salts — I slipped in one particularly mischievous Amazon order: a dozen miniature bottles of Coca-Cola and a pack of tiny, sealable plastic bags. The kind you might store beads in. Or buttons. Or, more commonly, the kind you'd see clutched in shaky hands during a late-night police raid scene on television.

My plan was simple — juvenile, even. But it made me laugh every time I pictured it. I'd pop a mini Coke bottle into one of those tiny bags, knot it shut with just enough air to puff it up, and then casually walk around camp offering it to people with an innocent smile and a loaded line:

"Hey, I found a small bag of coke. Want it?"

It was ridiculous. But also just plausible enough to jolt the nervous system of even the most seasoned Burner. After all, on the playa, where dust and decadence swirl in equal measure, context is everything — and I was counting on that ambiguity to stir the pot.

Armed with my stash of bagged beverages and a sense of humor that veered gleefully toward the absurd, I set off into camp, ready to watch the chaos unfold.

Now, let's be clear: at Burning Man, you do not ask for or offer drugs to strangers. It's an unspoken but absolute rule — one that everyone takes seriously. Law enforcement is present in full force, and undercover officers have been known to blend in seamlessly with the crowd. The consequences aren't just a buzzkill — they're real and immediate.

So every interaction I'm about to recount took place within the safety of my own camp — with people I knew, who knew me. That didn't make the prank any less effective.

First up was Charlie, mid-sixties, ex-military, now the unofficial hammock oracle of the camp.

"Hey," I said, dropping my voice and glancing around theatrically. "I found a small bag of coke… you want it?"

He jolted upright like someone had lit a fire under him. "Are you insane?" he hissed, eyes darting around. "What the hell are you doing?"

I slowly opened my palm.

He stared. Blinked.

Inside the tiny plastic bag, sealed at the top, was a miniature bottle of Coca-Cola.

He stared for a beat — then doubled over, laughing. "You little shit," he said, wiping his eyes. "You nearly stopped my heart. Brilliant."

***

Mira, our unofficial safety officer and part-time LED medusa, was tightening a bolt on her speaker rig when I sidled up.

"Hey," I said, lowering my voice conspiratorially. "I found a small bag of coke. Do you want it?"

She straightened up slowly, brow furrowed, lips pressed into a thin line. Her entire energy shifted — from casual fixer to crisis containment.

"Whoa. Careful," she said, glancing around. "Do you *know* how many people got arrested last year? Someone in our pod got searched just for holding a suspicious envelope."

She looked at me like she was already planning my extraction route.

I held out my closed fist.

"Mira. Trust me."

There was a pause. Then, cautiously, she reached out and opened my fingers.

The instant she saw the red label through the crinkled plastic, her face transformed — brows unknitting, jaw dropping, and then — boom — that full-body laugh she was famous for. The kind that made her head tilt all the way back.

"Oh my god. That's *evil*," she said, smacking my arm. "I was ready to hide you under a pile of beanbags. You've weaponized wholesomeness."

***

Zoë was sipping yerba maté from a ram's horn and staring into a mirror she'd mounted onto a potted cactus. She was one of those Burners who spoke in haiku even when ordering breakfast.

I approached gently, not wanting to interrupt whatever plane of existence she was on.

"Hey," I murmured, "I found a small bag of coke. Do you want it?"

She turned, slowly, as if decoding the phrase. Then she nodded — not cautiously, not enthusiastically, but with a kind of amused solemnity.

"I thought you might," she said.

I extended my hand and let the reveal unfold.

She stared at the tiny bottle in its crinkled wrapper, and without missing a beat, smiled.

"A literal interpretation of capitalist yearning," she mused. "You've condensed the entire war on drugs into a pocket-sized allegory."

She took a thoughtful sip of her tea.

"Thank you," she added. "That was delightful."

Then she turned back to the cactus, and I swear the cactus looked like it was smiling too.

***

Alex had just returned from a sunrise set at PlayAlchemist — shirtless, sun-dusted, pupils like saucers. Glitter clung to him like he'd rolled through a unicorn's divorce.

He was still bouncing from the bassline when I leaned in, dropping my voice to a low, conspiratorial hush.

"Hey," I said, glancing sideways, "I found a small bag of coke. Do you want it?"

His eyes locked onto mine like a bloodhound on a scent.

"Yes," he said instantly. "How much?"

I looked around theatrically, then curled my fingers into a fist and held it out — all cloak and dagger.

He reached for it slowly, reverently, like he was about to touch the grail. The hush of paranoia met the thrill of possibility.

Then he opened my palm.

There it was — the tiniest, most innocent bottle of Coca-Cola, neatly sealed in its little ziplock bag.

He stared. Blanked. And then erupted.

"OH MY GOD," he howled, stumbling backward with laughter. "You absolute menace. I thought I was about to commit an actual crime!"

He clutched the bag to his chest like contraband made of joy.

"You," he declared, spinning around and pointing at me like he'd just found the Messiah of Mischief, "are the dealer we never knew we needed!"

Then he held the bag aloft, Lion King style, and shouted to the dust gods:

"Behold! The most dangerous man at Burning Man!"

***

Later that afternoon, the kind of golden hour where the dust glows like suspended magic and everything feels just a bit more cinematic. Kevin and I were lounging in camp, still giddy from the earlier prank runs, retelling the best reactions and snorting into our water bottles.

That's when he said it.

"You know what would make this legendary?"

I looked up. He had that twinkle in his eye. The one that meant he'd either come up with a brilliant idea or something that would get us temporarily exiled from polite society.

"Let's offer it to the cops."

My laugh came out as a splutter. "You're joking."

He wasn't.

We both knew how risky — or at least reckless — it sounded. Law enforcement at Burning Man isn't a joke. You don't wave suspicious baggies around, especially near Esplanade, where Rangers and Bureau of Land Management officers are stationed like silent sentinels in mirrored sunglasses. But the sheer absurdity of it — the perfect punchline to the perfect prank — was too delicious to resist.

So we packed our courage, mounted our bikes, and pedaled out.

The playa stretched before us like an open dare, every rotation of the pedals a heartbeat louder. Kevin had one of the little bags tucked into his pocket. I kept running the line in my head, trying to suppress a grin.

By the time we reached the Esplanade, the sun was low, casting long shadows over art cars and mutant vehicles cruising past like creatures in a desert dream. Two officers stood by a white pickup, chatting casually, their body language relaxed but alert.

We dismounted.

Kevin nudged me. "You or me?"

"I'll do it," I said, swallowing.

We walked up, casual as we could manage. My palms were sweating. I kept my movements slow, measured. You don't joke with authority — unless you really know what you're doing.

"Excuse me," I said, flashing what I hoped was a disarming smile. "I found a small bag of coke. Would either of you like it?"

Instant silence.

Both officers turned.

One of them narrowed his eyes. His hand didn't move, but I swear his whole posture shifted.

I held out my closed fist. Slowly, theatrically, I unfurled my fingers.

The moment stretched.

He looked down… saw the tiny bottle of Coca-Cola inside the plastic bag… and for a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then — the corner of his mouth twitched. His partner let out a short bark of laughter. And the first one — the serious one — shook his head slowly and grinned.

"You guys," he said, "are lucky that's actually funny."

We exhaled, in stereo.

As we turned to go, one of them called out, "Hey — got any diet?"

***

There's something deliciously mischievous about the playa — a kind of unspoken invitation to mess with expectations, to blur the lines between sincerity and satire, and to find joy in the most ridiculous setups. This little prank worked not because it was clever, but because it tapped into that spirit — that fine line between absurdity and delight that runs through the very dust of Burning Man.

And, credit where it's due, not all law enforcement officers at the Burn are killjoys. While their presence is serious and their role essential, every now and then you meet someone behind the badge who gets the joke — and laughs along with the rest of us.

That, perhaps, is the magic of the place: everyone — prankster, artist, ranger, cop — is caught up in the same swirling experiment of presence, play, and surprise.

Puff and Bluff

Operation Psy-High

It was the kind of afternoon where the sun hit the playa like a cosmic heat lamp and everything shimmered—people, pyramids, promises. I was parked in a half-collapsed lawn chair outside a mutant art bus shaped like a giant crab smoking a pipe. Around me: a lazy sprawl of half-naked philosophers, snack scavengers, and sparkle ponies recovering from their morning existentialism.

Someone was playing ambient sitar remixes from a speaker shaped like a cactus. Someone else was arguing with a sentient AI made of mirrors and bad decisions. It was, in short, Wednesday.

That's when he appeared. Not dramatically. Not like a dust-streaked messiah. Just a guy.

He had the kind of face you forget right after you see it—which made him oddly memorable. Tan cargo shorts. Beat-up boots. A faded t-shirt that said "Don't Panic" in a font that was either ironic or sincere depending on how much ketamine you'd had. Around his neck: a blue-and-orange bandana so stiff with dust it could've doubled as a frisbee.

He looked like the sort of guy who might have once been in a ska band. Or maybe led a guided meditation in a Men's Healing Dome. His goggles were up on his forehead, and slung across his chest was a fanny pack the size of a small nation-state. He had playa cred—but something about him buzzed just a click off-beat.

He strolled up casually, nodding at the guy trying to deep-throat a freeze pop in the shade.

Then he turned to our group and said, in the universal dialect of burners who've run out of fun:

"Hey, sorry to bother y'all… You wouldn't happen to have a joint, would you? Mine got soaked when I fell off a flamingo float at Duck Pond. Ruined my whole stash. It's been a long dusty pilgrimage since then, and all I've got to show for it is dehydration and trauma from a bad mushroom DJ set."

It was a solid pitch. Vulnerable. Vaguely mythic. The kind of story that earns you weed and a hug.

We didn't know it yet, but we were about to meet the most creative narc who never was.

And the playa? The playa was listening.

Of course, someone said yes.

They always do. It's Burning Man. A rookie mistake—because any veteran knows the playa is crawling with cops and law enforcement, hiding in plain sight, waiting for exactly this kind of handoff.

From behind a pile of crocheted pillows, two heads emerged—sun-dappled, blissed-out, and probably in the tail-end of a cuddle coma. The girl wore a sunflower crown and a necklace made of dried mushrooms (decorative? medicinal? unclear). The guy had long hair, peace-sign pasties, and a permanent smile that suggested he'd never once had a bad trip—or if he had, he'd made friends with it.

"Of course, brother," the girl beamed, reaching into a sequined pouch shaped like a toadstool. "Sharing is caring. The earth provides."

She handed him a neat little joint wrapped with gold-tipped paper. It looked ceremonial. Possibly blessed. Possibly laced with the spirit of Terrence McKenna.

Cody—because by now we knew his name, or at least his playa name, "Softshell"—accepted it with reverence. Held it up to the light. Smelled it like it was a truffle. Then paused. His eyes narrowed.

And that's when it happened.

He stepped back.

Raised his left hand.

Pressed something clipped to his shoulder that we hadn't noticed until now: a walkie-talkie.

It crackled. Loud enough to jolt the fluffiest among us back to reality.

"Base, we have a 420 exchange in progress. Suspects are non-violent. Repeat: non-violent. Tie-dye visible. Multiple peace totems. Proceeding with de-escalation protocol."

The air went still.

The girl's eyes widened. The guy's smile faltered for the first time in what might have been three days.

"Wait… what?" she asked, eyes darting between Cody's suddenly authoritarian posture and the walkie-talkie.

Cody gave her the kind of slow nod that only government agents and kindergarten teachers use.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you both to remain calm and demonstrate intent for non-criminal transcendence."

"Are you… a cop?"

"No ma'am," he said, voice level. "I'm the idea of a cop. And right now, you're experiencing guilt-based reality simulation. You're not being arrested. You're being assessed. Unless…"

He held up a finger like he was about to recite scripture.

"Unless you can prove your harmlessness through an immediate synchronized aura cleanse, performed using only interpretive dance and hummingbird vocalizations. You have thirty seconds to comply."

The guy blinked. "What's a hummingbird vocalization?"

Cody just whispered:

"Believe in yourself."

And that was all it took.

They stood up—she barefoot, he still wearing a single rollerblade—and began flapping their arms in wide loops, humming erratically, something between didgeridoo and malfunctioning kettle. She twirled. He attempted a cartwheel. They collided. They harmonized. They spun like confused wind chimes.

Cody watched solemnly, like a monk watching a rain dance.

Then he clicked the walkie-talkie again and said:

"Base, subjects have passed the Vibe Check. Situation contained. No further action required."

He handed back the joint, saluted them with two fingers, and disappeared into the shimmer of the heat.

The girl turned to us, dazed. "Was that real?" she asked.

The guy shrugged. "Nothing's real out here. Except vibes."

***

Later that afternoon, Cody reappeared like a desert glitch—same dusty swagger, same fanny pack of mystery, same "Don't Panic" shirt now even more covered in playa.

This time, he wandered into the shade of a chill dome shaped like a jellyfish. Inside: cushions, lazily turning fans, and a lone guy sprawled across a beanbag chair that had clearly seen things.

He was your typical bicycle bro—shirtless, tanned like a leather wallet, wraparound shades, and legs dusted with what could've been playa or powdered protein. He had the restless look of someone who was either vibing hard or scoping exit points.

Cody eased into the space casually.

"Yo, you wouldn't happen to have a joint, would you? Mine got jacked by a rogue art car during sunrise. Been dry since Tuesday."

Bicycle Bro didn't answer right away. He scanned Cody the way desert creatures scan for predators—sizing up shirt slogans, walkie bulges, and energy fields.

After a beat, he reached into a bike pouch, pulled out a half-smoked joint, and held it out.

Cody took it, turned it slowly in his fingers, nodded once… and then clicked the walkie-talkie.

"Control, suspect has initiated transfer. LED bike present. Suspect appears calm but twitchy. Unicorn backup requested at Dome Theta."

Then, with a steely gaze: "Step away from the substance and prepare for sobriety verification."

There was a moment of pure, crystallized silence.

Bicycle Bro blinked. His sunglasses shifted slightly, revealing an eye that was calculating trajectory, wind resistance, and risk tolerance.

"Wait. Are you serious?" he asked, already rising.

Cody nodded.

"Deadly."

That was all it took.

The bro turned, leapt onto his bike, and in a single fluid motion, kicked off into the dust like Mad Max with better hydration.

His ride lit up in a trail of flashing EL wire, and in seconds, he was a silhouette swallowed by the shimmer.

Cody stood still, watching the dust swirl in his wake. Then turned to me.

"Now that one knows the playa," he said, tapping his temple. "Never trust a guy with symmetrical tan lines."

He stubbed the half-joint in the sand and wandered off in the direction of the porta-potties, presumably to stage his next act.

***

We were still laughing about the guy who'd vanished into the dust on his bike when we heard Cody's voice again—this time drifting over from the next camp.

"God, that smells amazing. You wouldn't happen to have a joint, would you? I ran out yesterday after chasing a tumbleweed I thought was my ex."

He was already mid-conversation with a camp cook who looked like he'd been awake since 1998.

We wandered closer, drawn by the scent of maple syrup and the promise of another performance.

This was Camp Flapjack Enlightenment, a place where breakfast was a belief system and the line between culinary delight and cult initiation was blurred by syrup and sleep deprivation. The cook was wiry, shirtless under a glitter-streaked apron that read "My Safe Word is Waffle," and he was flipping pancakes with the trance-like intensity of a man holding chaos at bay with carbs.

Cody leaned in, rubbing his stomach theatrically.

The cook laughed. "Oh playa heartbreak, been there." He flipped a pancake with a twist of the wrist and reached into a coffee tin labelled 'Herbs, Probably'. From it, he pulled out a modest joint and handed it over like it was sacred.

Cody took it gently, held it up to the light, then—click—pressed his walkie-talkie.

"Dispatch, I have an active exchange. Repeat, pancake-wielding suspect has distributed controlled herbs in proximity to minors dressed as crustaceans. I am engaging. Officer Maple deploying."

The cook froze mid-flip. Batter dripped from his spatula like tension from a movie scene.

"Wait… are you a cop?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

"Sir," Cody said, flipping open the flap of his fanny pack to reveal a completely blank laminated card, "I'm with the Department of Psychedelic Integrity. Undercover. Deep cover. Like… spirulina-level deep."

The cook squinted. "That's… not a real department."

"It is if you've had enough ayahuasca," Cody said solemnly. "Now. I am technically required to detain you. Unless…"

He leaned in, voice lowering like he was about to reveal the meaning of life.

"Unless you can perform a heartfelt apology in falsetto. While continuing to make pancakes."

The cook stared. "Falsetto?"

Cody nodded. "With emotional vulnerability."

There was a long silence. Then, with the resigned air of a man who'd once serenaded a customs officer to avoid baggage fees, the cook launched into an off-key but passionate performance of Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word, lyrics altered to fit the mood:

"What do I gotta dooo… to not get arrest-ted…

While flipping cakes for the dust-suggested?"

He flipped a pancake. Syrup flew. Somewhere in the background, a crustacean child cheered.

Cody nodded approvingly.

"You're lucky this is your first offence. A second one would require you to duet with the nearest rubber chicken."

He handed back the joint, clicked his walkie-talkie, and whispered,

"Situation neutralized. Pancake vibes high."

The cook, panting, stared at the still-smoking griddle.

"You're not really a cop, are you?" he said, breathless.

Cody smiled, zen as a lizard in sunlight.

"I'm a mirror. You're the hallucination."

Then he vanished once again—into the blur of dust, art cars, and existential uncertainty.

***

Back at camp, the sky was shifting from gold to charcoal, and someone had finally rigged up the string of solar lights that only half-worked. We sat in a

lopsided circle of camping chairs, sipping mystery cocktails from mislabeled mason jars, shoes off, knees dusty, heads still full of that day's absurdities.

I told them about Cody—the walkie-talkie, the fake badge, the falsetto pancakes.

By the time I got to the crustacean children and the Department of Psychedelic Integrity, people were wheezing with laughter. Someone snorted chai through their nose. Someone else kept muttering, "Officer Maple," and shaking their head in disbelief.

And then, as it often does at Burning Man, the laughter gave way to a kind of warm stillness. A moment of shared suspension.

"Thing is," said Mira, our camp philosopher, "he wasn't just pranking people. He was… reminding us how easily we give away trust. Or dignity. Or weed."

"Or the ability to say no," someone added.

"He was a walking vibe check," said another. "A chaos catalyst."

I swirled the last inch of melted ice in my jar and said, "He made the familiar weird again. Like, we all know this place is full of undercover cops. But he flipped that paranoia on its head. Turned it into theatre."

"Do you think he was a cop?" someone asked.

We all looked at each other.

Then we laughed again. Harder this time. Because out here, that was the wrong question.

Someone threw another log on the burn barrel. Sparks danced into the desert night like tiny, giddy ghosts.

And just before the music from the next camp kicked in, I said—

"I hope I never see him again."

Because some stories are better left half-true, half-baked, and fully dusted.

Hot Drop

An unexpected delivery in the middle of nowhere

It was late afternoon in deep playa — that particular hour when the sun forgets mercy and the air thickens like soup. We'd found brief asylum at a dusty art installation: a scattered lounge of couches and faded sofas, each half-buried in sand, like the living room of a long-lost caravan that had tried to colonize the desert and failed.

There were five, maybe six of us there. No one spoke. Words felt heavy, like they'd sink straight to the ground if released. Some of us were slumped, others reclined, heads tilted back, limbs akimbo, all silently negotiating a ceasefire with the heat. Even the wind had given up — just the occasional sigh through cracked upholstery.

Somewhere far off, a sound system blared faintly — a pulse of bass lost in the distance — but here, the stillness held. No one was doing anything. And in that rarefied quiet, it felt like we were waiting for something. We didn't know what.

Then came the hum.

At first, it was just a vibration on the edge of our awareness — a low whine, mechanical and out of place. Heads turned slowly, like sunflowers too tired to care. From the shimmering horizon, a figure emerged, wobbling slightly on an e-bike, kicking up little clouds of dust as he approached.

He wore what looked like a pizza delivery uniform — red cap, shirt tucked in, something slung across his back. His posture was determined, absurdly focused, as though the desert were just another city block to him. The bike coughed and hissed with effort as it crept closer, its rider squinting against the brightness, scanning our little outpost like he had coordinates and we were the drop zone.

He rolled to a stop just a few feet away, dust swirling in a lazy halo around his legs. No greeting. No smile. Just a question, barked with the urgency of someone running late:

"Is there a John here?"

Nobody moved.

The man sighed. Not the kind of sigh you give when you're exasperated — more like someone ticking off a list, moving to Plan B.

"Andy?" he called, scanning our heat-stunned faces. "Pizza delivery for Andy?"

Someone near me blinked slowly and shook their head. The rest of us just stared, caught somewhere between confusion and awe. It wasn't just the ridiculousness of the scene — it was how serious he was about it.

"Jamie?" he tried finally. "Anyone named Jamie?"

There was a pause, and then a quiet voice from the far end of a sunken couch:

"…yeah?"

We all turned. A shirtless guy with a half-empty water bottle and dust-crusted sunglasses was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. He didn't sound sure of his own name.

The delivery man narrowed his eyes.

"You're Jamie?"

The guy nodded slowly, like it was a question he hadn't had to answer in a while.

The delivery man threw his arms in the air. "You've gotta be kidding me!" he barked. "You actually ordered a pizza from Reno… to be delivered in the middle of the goddamn desert?"

He shook his head in disbelief, yanked a pizza box out of the satchel on his back, and shoved it toward Jamie. "You're an asshole."

And with that, he turned, mounted his e-bike, and pedaled back into the haze, vanishing into the dust like a mirage in reverse.

For a moment, no one said anything.

The box sat in Jamie's lap like a diplomatic parcel delivered under duress. He looked down at it, blinking slowly, then glanced up at us — half-expecting it to explode, or vanish, or turn out to be empty.

He lifted the lid.

A rush of steam rose into the desert air. Real steam. Real pizza. The smell was unmistakable — melted cheese, garlic, heat, oregano. It hit like a hallucination, dense and oily and impossibly fresh.

Someone let out a low whistle.

Another person muttered, "No way."

We all gathered around, drawn by instinct, reverence, disbelief. Jamie looked as surprised as the rest of us. There was no receipt, no explanation, just eight perfect slices — like something summoned by ritual, not reason.

Of course he hadn't ordered it. Nobody had. That wasn't the point.

Without a word, he passed the box to the person next to him. And one by one, we each took a slice. No cutlery, no plates. Just dusty fingers and slow, grateful chewing. It tasted like myth. Like something the desert gave back for once.

Somewhere far off, the wind picked up again.

We never saw the guy again.

But the pizza?

Surprisingly decent.

Your Complaint Has Been Noted

Paperwork for the Soul

There's something deliciously ironic about the existence of a bureaucracy in the middle of the world's most liberated city.

Nestled between a pink narwhal art car and a theme camp called "Quantum Womb," the Bureau stood stoically — a geodesic dome dressed in grim shades of grey. The word "BUREAU" loomed large in block letters across the entrance flap, while the rest — of Benevolent Misinformation — was barely legible beneath the dust. Which, of course, was the point.

To the untrained eye, especially a dusty, disoriented virgin burner stumbling in off the 2:30 & K radius, this place looked official. Clinical. Even helpful.

Inside, we'd set up a full-blown, soul-sapping parody of government hell: cubicles, manila folders, dot-matrix printers chugging out nonsense, and "employees" in beige cardigans and budget clip-on ties. No music. No glitter. No smiles. Just forms — mountains of them — and an air of ominous procedural importance.

And me? I'd been here for hours. Not as a prankster, not exactly an employee — more like a friendly parasite. I sipped lukewarm instant coffee from a styrofoam cup labelled "Director of Idle Observations" and watched the comedy of human confusion unfold. Every few minutes, someone would stumble in with a query: lost item, wrong address, philosophical crisis... Every time, they were met with deadpan seriousness and immediately set on an escalating chain of illogical tasks that would have made Kafka proud.

There was no punchline. That was the punchline.

It was a beautiful, bureaucratic black hole — a satire so dry it made the desert feel humid. And today, I could already sense we were about to reel in a good one.

He arrived like many do — squinting through the dust, clutching a half-crushed water bottle, and scanning the drab signage with the hopeful intensity of someone about to be helped.

His name — he announced this in the tone of a man accustomed to customer service — was Craig. Khaki shorts, sensible shoes, sunscreen streaked across his nose like war paint. The type who'd printed the Survival Guide and laminated it.

He looked around at the grim cubicles and sighed with relief. "Oh thank god," he said. "An official help center."

I nearly snorted my coffee.

Craig leaned on the counter marked Reception – External Affairs Division and said, with the weary indignation of a man who paid good money for serenity, "I'd like to file a noise complaint."

Diane — queen of deadpan, draped in a shapeless brown shawl, her employee ID reading Auditory Impact Liaison — didn't blink. She adjusted her glasses, pulled out a clipboard, and said, "Please specify the category of noise: disruptive, ecstatic, confrontational, or tantric."

Craig hesitated. "It was... music. Really loud techno. All night."

Diane nodded solemnly. "Ah. Category: Sonic Aggression via Rhythmic Pulsation. You'll need to fill out Form D-69." She handed it over.

Craig took it with the cautious gratitude of someone who thinks progress is being made.

He sat beside me without a word, dutifully filling out the boxes:

Time of Disturbance: *2:50am*

Type of Music: "*Some kind of industrial German thumping*"

Did the bassline invade your dreamspace?: *Yes*

Was the source attempting transcendence or dominance?: *Not sure*

He paused and looked up at me. *"This place is great. Finally someone's taking this seriously."*

I just smiled and sipped my coffee.

Craig returned to the counter, form in hand, lines carefully filled in with the tight cursive of a man who used to be Head Boy.

Diane accepted it with the solemnity of a notary at The Hague. She flipped through the pages with exaggerated slowness, one eyebrow twitching at "industrial German thumping."

"Mmm," she murmured, "this would fall under a Subclass 4-Auditory Infraction. You'll need to escalate this to the P.L.U.R. Compliance Division."

"P.L.U.R.?" Craig asked.

"Peace, Love, Unity, Respect," she recited, "the baseline auditory standard of communal harmonic resonance."

She handed him another form — a neon pink carbon copy labeled *Form QX-17: Provisional Permission to Lodge an Auditory Disturbance Grievance.*

Craig blinked. "But I already filled one form."

"Correct," Diane said. "Form D-69 initiates the grievance. Form QX-17 grants you the right to feel aggrieved."

Craig paused, lips twitching with the early symptoms of doubt. "Do I... need to get this signed by someone?"

"By two people," Diane confirmed. "A Camp Harmony Officer and a Certified Emotional Impact Verifier. Both must not be affiliated with the source of the sound."

Craig turned to me again. "Any idea where I find those?"

I shrugged. "I think the Camp Harmony Officer's been trying to align his chakras for four hours. But you might find the Emotional Impact Verifier near the silent disco. She's wearing a vest made of bubble wrap."

He nodded, scribbled this down like it was gospel, and set off with the determination of a man who believes justice will prevail.

***

He returned after nearly an hour, a little more dusted, a little less confident. The once-crisp pink Form QX-17 was now crumpled and damp at the corners, half-stamped, the ink slightly smeared.

His expression had shifted. That eager, righteous hope had curdled into quiet disbelief.

Still, he approached the counter like a man determined to follow due process.

"I got it signed," he said, trying to flatten the form on the counter. "Mostly. The Emotional Impact Verifier said I didn't complete the interpretive movement sequence correctly, but she gave me a provisional stamp. It has a... dolphin on it?"

Diane didn't bat an eye. "Yes. That's the partial Level 1 Verification sigil. But for a valid grievance submission, you'll need to supplement it with a Dust Disruption Assessment."

"A what?"

"A Dust Disruption Assessment," she repeated, as if this were obvious. "If the sonic frequencies interfered with your interaction with the particulate atmosphere, it must be documented. You'll need a Dust Level Assessor."

"Where do I find one of those?"

"They're field-based," she said. "Usually near the MOOP line. They wear beige. They'll give you a sachet."

He blinked slowly. "A... sachet."

"Yes. To collect your disrupted silence. It must be dry, loosely compacted, and uncorrupted by irony."

There was a pause. A long one.

Craig opened his mouth, closed it again. He glanced around the office — at the dot-matrix printer wheezing out nonsense reports, at the oversized wall chart titled Complaint Escalation Matrix, at the employee named Gary, Bureau Stoic silently stamping blank pages.

Something in him wavered.

But not yet. Not quite.

He sighed, tucked the form into his back pocket, and trudged out into the heat.

No one said a word. Diane pulled out the next form — a double-sided monstrosity titled *XR-88: Mandatory Silence Quality Reassessment Survey*, featuring tick-boxes like:

☐ Is your silence crunchy, velvety, moist, or infinite?

☐ On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the silence before the incident?

☐ Do you believe silence holds a grudge?

And the box at the bottom:

☐ I consent to the Bureau gently gaslighting me into inner peace.

No one laughed. That was the rule.

But a few of us around the room exchanged the briefest flickers of amusement.

Level Three was nearly complete.

***

He came back dustier than ever, barefoot this time, still gripping his form — now smudged with playa grit and what looked suspiciously like glitter glue. The sachet he'd been given dangled from his wrist like a cursed charm. Inside was... something. Possibly silence. Possibly not.

His sunglasses were gone. His hair was wilder. His aura? Fraying.

"I spoke to the Dust Level Assessor," he said. "They asked me to lie in the dirt and whisper my grievance to the ground."

"And did you?" asked Diane, without looking up.

"I... did," he muttered.

She held out her hand. He passed over the sachet.

She weighed it thoughtfully, then frowned. "Hmm. Inconclusive resonance profile. Could be minor reverberation trauma. Could be a placebo echo. We'll need you to file an *XR-88*."

"The... Mandatory Silence Quality Reassessment Survey?"

"Yes. Version B.1. Updated since this morning. Includes the quiet rage clause."

He stood very still.

Then, with the composure of someone filing for emotional bankruptcy, he said, "Okay. Fine. Let's do this."

We watched as Diane slid the new form across. He read the first line:

"Please rank your favorite silences from least oppressive to most forgiving."

His eyes twitched.

He looked up. "Is this... is this real?"

She smiled gently. "Sir, this is the Bureau."

And that was it.

He snapped.

In the quietest, most bureaucratically appropriate way imaginable, he slammed his hands on the desk and bellowed, "I just want someone to tell me if it's normal for a sound camp to play psytrance remixes of Gregorian chants until six in the goddamn morning!"

Someone in the corner offered a polite golf clap.

Diane slid open the emergency drawer and calmly produced a yellow form:

Form D-9: Official Breakdown Declaration.

"I'll need you to initial here," she said. "And here. And—yes—here, under 'Cathartic Event Acknowledgment.'"

He stared at the form. Then at Diane. Then at the other Bureau staff — one of whom was now slowly folding paper cranes out of discarded grievance reports.

Then something shifted.

He started to laugh.

First a chuckle. Then a giggle. Then a wheezing, shoulder-shaking, full-bodied laugh that echoed through the Bureau and out into the scorched afternoon air.

No one stopped him.

Finally, he wiped his eyes. "You people are insane."

Diane nodded. "Correct."

"I wasted half my day."

She shrugged. "Some would call it performance therapy."

He took a breath. "What... what happens now?"

She smiled. "Now that you've filed a proper breakdown, you're eligible to apply for a temporary Bureau post. You're welcome to shadow Gary. He's our Specialist in Ambient Inconvenience."

Gary raised a hand solemnly.

Craig hesitated.

Then he sat down.

Level Four: Complete.

***

By sunset, Craig was wearing a borrowed tie over his bare chest and diligently stamping "DENIED" on random pages of a printer jam report that no one had actually requested. He had stopped asking questions. His brow was furrowed in mock concentration, his performance earnest, his transition complete.

"Your denial is approved," he intoned gravely to a woman requesting permission to yawn ironically.

Another visitor was asked to provide a haiku about their unmet expectations. Craig evaluated it carefully, circled "ambiguous dust metaphors" on a checklist, and gave them a gold sticker shaped like a bureaucratic pigeon.

He had found peace.

Not resolution, mind you. Certainly not closure. Just… peace. That rare, sacred absurdity that comes when you realise the only way out is through — and the way through is stupid.

Outside the Bureau, the sun was setting in an orange blaze, casting long shadows over the ridiculous paper towers and signage that read:

"Paperless System in Progress. Please submit triplicate copies."

Somewhere in the distance, the same sound camp began its nightly ritual: Gregorian monks beat-matched with glitch hop.

Craig didn't even flinch.

He was too busy helping a newcomer fill out Form *W.T.F.: Willingness To Forgive*.

And inside the Bureau, the seasoned pranksters, the volunteers of chaos exchanged a knowing glance.

Another one converted. Mission complete.

The Gospel According to Teresa

The sermons were dusty, the faith contagious.

Some people show up at Burning Man with nothing but a tutu and a dream. Teresa showed up with a laminated map of the city, a 12-point survival guide, and the confidence of a ten-time Burner.

She spoke in acronyms—BRC, MOOP, DPW—and dropped terms like "deep playa" and "Temple burn" as if she'd coined them. By the time we crossed the Nevada state line, I was convinced she had a playa name, at least three ex-lovers camped at Distrikt, and an honorary doctorate in radical self-reliance.

Kevin, our mutual friend and ride-share ringleader, mostly drove and laughed at our backseat debates—about hydration strategies, whiteouts, bike locks, and whether Larry Harvey's original hat was in a museum somewhere. For every Burner tale I tentatively offered, Teresa had five—gleaned, she said, from "years of stories, close calls, and dusty rebirths."

I'd never felt more like a novice.

And so we hurtled toward the desert, toward the dust, toward that strange in-between place where myth becomes memory and memory becomes myth. All the while, Teresa talked us through it like a veteran tour guide returning to sacred ground.

Which made what happened at the Gate... all the more surprising.

***

We left Montana before dawn—Kevin behind the wheel, me in the passenger seat, and Teresa nestled in the back like she was being chauffeured to a dusty coronation.

It was her idea to leave at 4 a.m. "We'll beat the heat and the traffic," she'd said, tightening a bungee cord across the top of a tote labelled Emergency

Glitter. Kevin and I exchanged a look. Neither of us had thought that far ahead.

The car was a hodgepodge of supplies—bikes strapped on back, water jugs rolling in the footwells, and a suspicious smell that might've been rotting fruit or incense or both. Teresa brought order to it all. Within minutes, she'd organized our route, announced optimal pit stops, and installed a Bluetooth playlist she'd titled Playa Pre-Game: Sunrise to Dust Storm.

I liked her immediately.

She had that dry humor you only find in people who've survived something dramatic and gone back for more. She talked about previous Burns like an old soldier might talk about wars. Not in a braggy way—more like someone who's part of a secret society and thinks you might be worthy of initiation.

"The trick," she said, unwrapping a suspiciously perfect vegan wrap at a gas station in Idaho, "is to accept that everything will break. Your tent. Your shoes. Your emotional stability. Once you make peace with that, the rest is magic."

Kevin chuckled, chewing beef jerky with the weary patience of a man who'd heard Teresa say things like this before. I, on the other hand, was rapt.

She knew all the camps. Knew which ones served pancakes, which ones offered spankings, which ones did both at once. She explained how not to get lost ("count your street and your clock-face—like 4:30 & I") and which art cars were overrated. She even had opinions about generator etiquette, which I didn't know was a thing.

Sometimes she spoke about it all in the past tense, but without ever actually saying "last year" or "in 2019." Other times, she'd go oddly quiet when Kevin and I swapped our own memories—like she was listening for confirmation that her version matched ours.

But I chalked it up to Burner burnout. Maybe she'd just been too many times. You could tell she was the type who took things seriously. Her annotated checklist for "essential items" included not only earplugs and vinegar foot soaks but also "conversational consent strategies" and "radical curiosity prompts."

As the desert landscape began to flatten out and the air got that metallic, pre-apocalyptic tang, I found myself leaning on Teresa's every word. She made

the unknown feel navigable. Like having a map, a compass, and a desert shaman rolled into one.

***

Somewhere after Reno, where the last reliable gas station sits like a shrine to caffeine and regret, Teresa began to preach.

Not loudly. Not theatrically. But with the quiet confidence of someone who had long ago taken the sacrament and now sought to pass it on.

"This isn't a festival," she said, over the dry hiss of desert wind through the cracked window. "It's a temporary autonomous zone. A re-imagining of the human experience."

I nodded, as one does when they're unsure if they're being inducted into a cult or a TED Talk.

"You'll see," she continued. "The moment you step into Black Rock City, the default world dissolves. No email. No branding. No spectators. Everyone's a participant."

Kevin, chewing sunflower seeds with rhythmic devotion, chimed in: "Unless you're on K."

Teresa ignored him. She was in the zone.

She told us how the city is built like a clock, with radial streets and an open playa at twelve o'clock. She explained the difference between Gifting and Barter with the patience of a librarian correcting a teenager's Wikipedia entry. She warned us against line-jumping at the porta-potties—"Burner karma is real," she said—and recited the Ten Principles with the slightly too-polished cadence of someone who had definitely rehearsed them.

But what truly impressed me wasn't the content. It was her tone.

There was no irony. No hesitation. She spoke with the ease of someone who'd absorbed the language of the playa so thoroughly, it felt lived-in. Like she'd been steeped in Burner lore through osmosis—through stories,

whispers, second-hand dust. The kind of familiarity that could be mistaken for memory.

At one point she said, "You never really go to Burning Man. You go through it."

I wrote that one down.

She told us how everyone eventually gets a playa name, how the city is shaped like a clock, and how Gifting wasn't about exchange—it was about generosity without expectation. She waxed poetic about mutant vehicles, the art installations that "just appear out of the mirage," and the rhythm of sunrise drum circles. Her descriptions were vivid, almost cinematic—like someone recounting memories that had left a mark.

Kevin and I listened like pilgrims to a desert oracle, grateful for the briefing.

And then there was her backpack.

Teresa's backpack was a work of art. Carabiners. Feathered pins. A tiny spray bottle of rosewater. But buried inside—somewhere between the biodegradable wet wipes and the emergency bindi kit—I spotted a brand-new pair of goggles. Still in their packaging.

"Spare set," she said, a little too quickly, tucking them away.

By then, I was already under her spell. Her words had nestled into my thoughts, quietly shaping the way I pictured the days to come. I found myself echoing her phrases, aligning my expectations to the rhythms she described.

It all felt right. Like I was being inducted—not just into a place, but into a way of seeing.

***

We hit the queue just after midnight. A slow, shimmering pilgrimage of headlights and anticipation, winding across the cracked desert floor. Kevin was behind the wheel, caffeine in his bloodstream and wonder in his eyes. Teresa rode shotgun, serenely alert, like she'd done this before. Like this was her fifth burn, not her first rodeo.

"This part can take hours," she said, voice calm, almost ritualistic. "But it's all part of the arrival. The delay is the doorway. You wait, you surrender, you transition."

It sounded poetic at the time. I was too tired to question it. Too enchanted to care.

The closer we crept to the gate, the more surreal it all became. Greeters with megaphones and high-vis vests danced in the moonlight, directing cars like traffic shamans. Techno throbbed faintly from a nearby camp. Somewhere, someone was juggling fire. It felt like we were entering a myth.

And then our car rolled to a stop.

A dust-caked figure leaned in through the open window, eyes hidden behind kaleidoscopic goggles.

"Welcome home!" they shouted. "Now… any virgins in the car?"

Silence.

Kevin shook his head with the quiet pride of a returning pilgrim.

I hesitated, wondering whether the technicality of having entered the city boundaries via Google Earth counted.

And then—Teresa turned toward the greeter and said, brightly, confidently, "Yep. Me."

It took a second to register.

Kevin turned to her. "Wait—what?"

The greeter whooped and opened the door. "Out you go!"

She stepped out barefoot, moonlight catching the dust on her skin like glitter. She lay down, arms outstretched, and swept her limbs through the desert powder, leaving behind a luminous dust angel.

Back in the car, still brushing sand from her elbows, she caught our stunned expressions and shrugged.

"Yeah, it's my first time. But my brother's been going for years. And all my friends. I guess I just… absorbed a lot."

Kevin looked betrayed. I couldn't stop laughing.

All that time, she'd sounded like a sage. A sherpa. A certified citizen of Black Rock City.

And she was just like us: dazzled, guessing, winging it.

Turns out, Teresa wasn't a veteran—she was just a really convincing rumor.

Cartography for the Lost

When every direction points to wonder.

Some people come to the playa seeking enlightenment.

I come seeking mischief.

Burning Man, for all its spiritual talk about transformation and radical inclusion, has a second soul — a prankster one. For every earnest sunrise meditation, there's a camp handing out existential fortune cookies that say "You will die, but not before lunch." For every temple of tears, there's a rogue sound car blasting Gregorian chants remixed with drum 'n' bass. I've always believed both halves are sacred — the reverent and the ridiculous — two sides of the same dust-covered coin.

So this year, I decided to make my offering to the gods of chaos.

I built compasses.

Not just any compasses — beautiful, vintage-style pocket ones, the kind you'd imagine clipped to the waistcoat of a Victorian explorer about to vanish into the heart of an undiscovered continent. Brass casings, glass faces, intricate little needles that quivered with possibility. I even printed tiny instruction cards that read, in elegant script: "*Find your true direction.*"

Except, of course, they didn't.

Because these were not instruments of orientation. They were invitations to surrender.

Inside each, the needle was unweighted — free-spinning, directionless, perfectly impartial to reality. And instead of North, South, East, and West, the dial bore the cardinal landmarks of the playa: The Man, The Temple, Centre Camp, and The Trash Fence. A cosmology of confusion.

Turn it once, and you might be "headed toward the Temple." Turn it again, and the same needle pointed solemnly at the airport or, worse, nowhere at all. The whole thing was nonsense disguised as navigation — a mechanical koan.

My intention wasn't cruelty. It was communion.

I wanted to gift joyful confusion — to loosen the grip of schedules, itineraries, and laminated spreadsheets of "must-see art." If Burning Man is a temporary city devoted to the collapse of default-world logic, then what better gift than a tool that lies with perfect sincerity?

I boxed up twenty of them in a tin stamped "Department of Directional Abandonment," loaded them into my bike basket, and set out like a Victorian trickster on safari, ready to release them into the wild.

After all, in a city built on dust and impermanence, what could be more beautiful than getting profoundly, gloriously lost?

The playa was a furnace by day and a dreamscape by night. I set out with my basket of compasses like some benevolent trickster-Santa, pedaling through clouds of alkali dust, scanning for the right souls to confuse.

***

My first victim—sorry, recipient—was spotted outside Camp Metronome, where every tent was arranged at mathematically precise angles, and their whiteboard schedule read "Sunrise cacao / group intention / deep clean / acro yoga."

She was a virgin Burner in the truest sense: spotless hydration pack, color-coded carabiners, laminated itinerary fluttering in the wind like a flag of over-preparedness. I approached with the solemnity of a priest offering sacrament.

"Would you like a compass?" I asked.

Her eyes widened. "Oh my god, thank you! I was literally just trying to figure out how to get from Robot Heart to the Temple tonight!"

She held it reverently, tapped the glass, and turned in a slow circle. The needle spun like it was auditioning for Swan Lake.

"Hmm," she frowned. "It says the Temple's… that way?" — she pointed confidently toward the distant airport.

I nodded sagely. "The playa has its own geometry."

She pedaled off in the completely wrong direction, disappearing into the dust — a tiny, determined dot heading bravely toward nowhere.

I never saw her again, of course. On the playa, seeing someone twice is about as likely as finding Wi-Fi in a dust storm.

But I like to think she eventually made it to the Temple — or somewhere better.

***

My next encounter was with a man who looked like he'd been forged directly from the playa itself — skin tanned to bronze leather, goggles etched with permanent dust halos, a beard that seemed to contain its own microclimate. His bike was more duct tape than metal, and his name tag simply read: "Still Here."

I offered him a compass with a straight face. "A gift," I said.

He took it delicately, turned it in his palm, and watched the needle spin with the lazy grace of a drunk ballerina. Then he let out a laugh so deep and honest it felt like the desert itself was joining in.

"Excellent," he said, eyes crinkling. "I've been looking for a reliable way to get lost."

He clapped me on the back — hard enough to rattle the dust out of my ribs — then tucked the compass into a pouch on his vest like it was a sacred relic.

"Most people spend the whole week trying to find themselves," he said, mounting his bike. "I prefer to lose myself properly."

Then he pedaled off into the whiteout, a faint golden blur swallowed by the horizon — a man perfectly at home in the art of disorientation.

***

My final act of cartographic sabotage was unplanned.

Near Centre Camp there's a wooden message board — a kind of analog internet where people post everything from "*Lost: silver tutu and minor dignity*" to "*Seeking cuddle-compatible Libras for sunrise pancakes.*"

I pinned one of the compasses there, right between a flyer for a "*Polyamory Support Circle (Advanced Beginners)*" and a sketch of a mutant vehicle called *The Disco Narwhal*. Then I sat back with an iced coffee, dusted, satisfied, ready to watch entropy bloom.

It didn't take long.

A curious woman in a sequin kimono stopped first. She peered at it, tapped the glass, and gasped like she'd discovered ancient technology.

Moments later, a man in a lab coat joined her, squinting through tinted goggles. "It's responding to magnetic flux from the Man burn site," he said, with the conviction of someone inventing science on the spot.

A third person wandered up and solemnly announced, "No, no — it's obviously a spirit compass. It points toward whatever your soul most fears."

Within minutes, a small congregation had formed, half of them kneeling, half of them arguing. Someone produced a singing bowl. Someone else started livestreaming to a GoPro that probably wasn't recording. A debate broke out over whether the compass was a random novelty or an oracle delivering personalized direction.

Then, as if choreographed by chaos itself, the spinning needle caught a glint of sunlight and froze — briefly — on *Temple*.

The crowd gasped. A hush fell.

A man whispered, "It's a sign."

Someone else replied, "Of what?"

No one agreed, and that was the miracle.

By the time I finished my coffee, they'd built a tiny shrine around it — a circle of bottle caps, feathers, and an avocado pit carved into the shape of a heart.

That's the thing about Burning Man: meaning is a team sport.

***

By the time the Man burned, my basket was empty.

Every last compass had found its way into the desert — tucked into pouches, pinned to bikes, or enshrined on message boards like relics from a parallel reality. I'd sown my chaos and felt pleasantly virtuous about it, a merry little agent of disorientation.

That night, the city was electric. The burn always is — the roar of fire cannons, the drum of basslines rolling across the dust, the sea of silhouettes pressed together in collective awe as the Man collapses into a cathedral of sparks. It's less a bonfire and more a momentary collapse of reason. Everyone cheers. Everyone weeps. Everyone becomes briefly, incandescently unmoored.

Afterward, I began the long ride back to camp — euphoric, ash-streaked, half-deaf from fireworks and tribal drums. Somewhere between 3:00 and Hallucination, I realized I had no idea where I was.

The street signs, it turned out, had been redecorated.

There's an unspoken tradition at the Burn: on the final night, pranksters "re-engineer" the city grid. Signs get swapped, twisted, or spun 180 degrees, transforming Black Rock City into a perfect labyrinth of misdirection.

I pedaled through it gamely, confident in my internal compass — until my internal compass failed, as all internal compasses eventually do.

After twenty minutes, the glowing streets blurred together in loops of déjà vu. Every landmark looked familiar and wrong. My bike light flickered, coughed, and died.

Suddenly, the desert was vast again — black, silent, alive with wind. The laughter and music had faded into a low, distant hum.

I stopped. Straddled my bike. Turned in slow circles, scanning for anything recognizable.

Nothing.

In a fit of irony the gods would've appreciated, I muttered aloud, "What I need is a compass."

And that's when the universe, ever the comedian, delivered.

Out of the darkness came the soft whirr of tires. A lone cyclist approached, haloed in the pale glow of EL wire, like a friendly ghost on two wheels. They slowed beside me, saw my confusion, and smiled.

"Lost?" he asked.

"Utterly," I admitted. "Street signs are chaos, my light's dead, and my camp could be anywhere between here and Utah."

He grinned — the kind of grin that said I've been there — and reached into his pocket.

"Don't worry," he said. "I've got just the thing for you."

With theatrical grace, he produced a small brass compass — one of mine. I recognized the engraving instantly.

They pressed it into my hand. "Here," he said. "It'll point you exactly where you need to be."

I looked down at the spinning needle, dancing in manic circles, and burst out laughing.

The playa, it seemed, had a sense of humor after all.

***

For a while, I just stood there in the dark, laughing into the emptiness — a tiny speck in an infinite sandbox, holding a broken compass that had finally found its punchline.

The cyclist who'd handed it to me vanished into the dust, leaving me with my own creation spinning madly in the palm of my hand. The joke had come full circle, and I was the punchline.

Dejected but amused, I climbed back onto my bike and started pedaling — one last, weary trek toward where I hoped camp might be. My bike light gave a final, sympathetic flicker and died completely, leaving me swallowed by the desert's hush.

The playa at night is a strange kind of ocean — vast, depthless, and thick with mystery. You can't tell where you're going; you just move and trust the dark to forgive you.

I was mid-thought — halfway between humility and hysteria — when the horizon blinked to life.

A glow. Then movement.

Out of the void emerged a fantastical mutant vehicle — a massive, glowing anglerfish gliding across the dust, its luminous lure bobbing gently in the dark. LEDs rippled along its metallic body, and from within came the muffled thump of music and laughter. It looked less like a machine and more like something conjured from a fever dream.

The anglerfish slowed beside me. The window slid open. A woman in goggles and a gold sequin jacket leaned out, her face glowing blue in the light of the lure.

"You okay out here?" she called.

I grinned weakly. "Define 'okay.' I'm lost, my light's dead, and this thing"—I held up the spinning compass—"isn't helping."

She laughed, a warm, generous sound that cut straight through the chill.

"You're lost with a compass? That's poetic."

"Want it?" I asked on impulse, holding it out. "It's my last one. Useless, but shiny."

She glanced at it, smiled, and pointed over her shoulder to a bank of blinking monitors and GPS readouts inside the art car. "Honey, this whole thing is a compass. But yours is much prettier."

Then she extended her hand. "Hop on. The best destinations are the ones you weren't looking for."

So I did.

I hitched my bike at the back and climbed aboard the glowing leviathan, feeling the bass vibrate through my bones as the anglerfish swam back into the night — a drifting constellation of laughter, music, and impossible generosity.

***

Later, I thought about the symmetry of it all — how the prank, the darkness, and the rescue had been part of the same design. The playa hadn't punished me; it had played along.

Maybe that's what navigation really is out here — not about direction, but connection.

You lose your bearings so you can find your people. You spin the needle and trust that something — or someone — will appear when it's meant to.

Somewhere out there, my compasses were still spinning.

And for the first time, I didn't care which way they pointed.

Matter Out of Place

Sometimes you must make a mess to see what's sacred.

By the time Will Venable rolled into Black Rock City, he already looked like a man halfway through a biblical trial.

His rental van was coated in talcum-fine dust, his goggles hung like a medal of minor valor, and his once-white T-shirt had achieved the same off-beige patina as everything else within a fifty-mile radius.

It was his first Burn.

A "virgin," as the old hands called it—though Will had never struck anyone as particularly virginal in any sense of the word.

He was a lifelong mischief-maker: the sort of person who'd program a printer to churn out fake memos about "Mandatory Hug Day" at the office just to see what middle management would do.

So when he read the Burning Man survival guide and saw the words LEAVE NO TRACE in bold, capital letters—followed by ominous sub-paragraphs on MOOP (Matter Out Of Place)—something in his prankster soul began to twitch.

No litter. No bins. No vendors. Eighty-thousand humans playing Mad Max meets Martha Stewart in a city that would vanish without a single sweet wrapper left behind.

To Will, that was impressive, sure—but it also felt like the ultimate invitation.

"No trash cans anywhere?" he mused aloud, eyeing the endless playa.

"Well then… what happens if you bring one?"

He didn't mean an actual bin, of course. He meant the idea of one—embodied, portable, and profoundly annoying.

***

As the sun melted over the horizon in syrupy orange, Will set up his modest camp: a small shade structure, a bike that already squeaked like guilt, and a cooler of optimism disguised as water bottles.

Around him, neighbors introduced themselves with playa names like Moon Ferret and Captain Entropy. They shared glow sticks, hugs, and unsolicited philosophy.

When the conversation turned to Leave No Trace, Will listened with mock solemnity, nodding as people explained grey-water evaporation stations, zip-lock bag etiquette, and the sacred ritual of MOOP sweeps.

Someone declared that Burning Man was "the cleanest city in the world."

Will grinned. "Challenge accepted," he muttered under his breath.

***

That night, under a sky crowded with impossible stars, he couldn't sleep.

The silence of the desert buzzed louder than the sound camps.

Somewhere, bass thundered faintly like a heartbeat.

Will lay in his sleeping bag, eyes wide, and thought:

If this place worships order, maybe what it needs is a tiny dose of chaos.

By morning, he had a plan.

A big, crinkly, black plastic plan.

***

He'd become the Trash Man of Black Rock City—the only guy wandering a city without bins, lugging a giant bag of garbage, and asking the forbidden question:

"Excuse me… where's your trash can?"

It was performance art, social experiment, and satire rolled into one.

And somewhere between the dust and delirium, Will suspected he might just learn something about the religion of cleanliness and the comedy of conviction.

Tomorrow, the trolling would begin.

***

By mid-morning, Black Rock City had entered that shimmering trance where the air itself seems to hum. Dust devils drifted lazily across the streets like ghostly tumbleweeds, and from somewhere far off came the faint thump-thump-thump of bass — the desert's heartbeat.

Inside his camp, Will was on a mission.

He'd spent the last hour constructing his masterpiece: a large, theatrical bag of "trash."

Not real trash — he wasn't a monster — but a lovingly curated collection of decoys. Empty paper cups. A few crushed cans (washed, naturally). A banana peel sculpted out of orange foam. Some broken glow sticks. And, for texture, a single rubber chicken.

He tied the bag with a flourish and slung it over his shoulder. It sagged convincingly, exuding the tragic dignity of a sack destined for nowhere.

From a distance, he looked like a post-apocalyptic Santa Claus — the Patron Saint of Poorly Managed Waste.

Before setting off, he made a small sign from cardboard:

"WHERE'S THE TRASH CAN?"

He attached it to the bag with duct tape and grinned at his reflection in the scratched side of his metal mug.

"Perfect," he said. "Let the sermon begin."

He pedaled out into the midday glare, goggles down, the bag thumping against the rear basket of his bike. Camp after camp unfolded around him — neon flags, misting stations, domes, pianos, and improbable hammocks strung between art cars. Everyone looked radiant, dusted, and content.

No one looked remotely worried about garbage.

He stopped at the first camp he saw with a shade structure and a sign that read "Sustain-Able Solutions." Underneath it, a group of well-intentioned Burners in linen robes were discussing carbon offsets over coconut water.

Will parked his bike, hoisted the bag, and smiled brightly.

"Hey guys! Quick question — where's your trash can?"

It was like detonating a small existential bomb.

One woman froze mid-sip. Another blinked, certain she'd misheard. A third — wearing a necklace made of recycled bottle caps — straightened up as if preparing for battle.

"There are no trash cans," she said slowly, the way one might speak to a concussed child.

"Right, right," Will said cheerfully. "So… where should I put this?"

The group glanced at each other, horror dawning collectively. Then came the lecture — about MOOP, Leave No Trace, personal responsibility, and the sacred principle of pack it in, pack it out.

Will listened politely, nodding, occasionally interjecting with questions like, "But what if I just leave it under that tree until tomorrow?"

There were no trees, of course, which somehow made the remark even worse.

By the time he pedaled away, they were still sputtering, half-offended, half-convinced they'd just encountered the devil in a hydration pack.

***

Back on the open playa, Will laughed until his goggles fogged.

He had known people took Leave No Trace seriously.

He hadn't realized it was practically a religion.

As he rode, he thought about the paradox of this place: a massive city that builds temples to impermanence, where the only unforgivable sin is littering.

There were no bins, no vendors, no cleaning crews.

Every bottle, bolt, and breadcrumb that arrived had to depart with its owner. Even grey water — the residue from washing dishes or brushing teeth — had to be evaporated or carried out. The system was elegant, brutal, and beautiful.

He admired it. He really did.

But admiration had never stopped him from poking at something sacred to see what it might reveal.

And the reactions so far were promising — moral panic mixed with bewilderment. He could already sense the rhythm of the prank forming, a symphony of discomfort that he would conduct across the playa.

Tomorrow, he'd go bigger.

Maybe he'd try the Rangers.

Maybe he'd visit one of the mega-camps.

Maybe — just maybe — he'd board that rumored Boeing 747 art car he'd heard about and see if they had "overhead bin space for waste."

Will patted the side of his trash bag affectionately.

"You and me, pal," he said. "Let's go spread a little entropy."

The bag rustled approvingly.

The sermon of the Trash Man had only just begun.

***

The next morning, Will upgraded his mission from "casual trolling" to "sociological field study."

He'd already been called "a walking violation" by one indignant Burner and "a performance artist with boundary issues" by another.

Encouraging signs, both.

This time, he aimed for a more devout audience.

He pedaled toward the Esplanade, where the camps grew more elaborate — domes made of hexagonal mirrors, misting tunnels, smoothie bars that somehow had better Wi-Fi than the default world. It didn't take long to find his next congregation: a camp called EcoSapiens.

Their banner read: *"We Are the Solution We've Been Waiting For."*

Under a stretch of shade netting, a circle of Burners sat on reclaimed wooden stools, earnestly debating biodegradable glitter. One man was adjusting a solar-powered dehydrator. Another was hand-sewing reusable produce bags from old parachutes. The camp looked like an environmental utopia crossed with an artisanal TED Talk.

Will parked his bike, hoisted his trash bag, and stepped reverently into the circle.

"Hey folks," he said. "Quick one — where's your trash can?"

The words landed like a grenade wrapped in compostable cellophane.

A woman in hemp shorts blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Trash can," Will repeated cheerfully. "Just need to drop this off. Won't take a sec."

There was a pause long enough to measure atmospheric CO_2.

Then the man with the solar dehydrator slowly rose, as if responding to an environmental emergency.

"There are no trash cans at Burning Man," he said, each word pronounced like a separate paragraph.

"Totally," Will said, nodding. "I'm just looking for the nearest one."

A collective gasp rippled through the circle. Someone dropped a mason jar.

Another Burner leaned forward, face glistening with moral conviction. "You're supposed to pack it in and pack it out. Everything you bring, you take back. Everything."

Will furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "Even, like… feelings?"

"Especially feelings!" snapped the woman in hemp shorts.

He looked suitably chastened. "Right. So if I don't take this out, does that make me… the problem we've been waiting for?"

There was an audible groan.

Someone muttered, "Is he trolling us?"

Someone else whispered, "No one trolls at Burning Man. That's not in the spirit."

Which, of course, only made it funnier.

The man with the dehydrator stepped closer, clearly trying to rescue the situation before it escalated into an ecological heresy.

"Look," he said, lowering his voice, "we all make mistakes our first year. But you need to understand — Leave No Trace is sacred. There's no central cleanup crew, no bins, no dumpsters. This"—he gestured toward the vast horizon—"stays pristine only because every single person takes radical responsibility."

Will nodded solemnly. "I love that. Radical. Responsibility. Got it."

Then he leaned in conspiratorially.

"So… if I hide it behind your camp sign, is that still technically my responsibility?"

The man's mouth opened. No sound came out.

The group's collective blood pressure rose as Will slowly backed away, smiling, bag rustling like a guilty conscience.

"Okay," he said brightly. "I'll just keep looking. Someone's bound to have a bin."

As he mounted his bike, a voice called after him:

"There are no bins, man! It's the principle!"

Will looked over his shoulder, grinning. "Ah yes. The principle of non-existence. Powerful stuff."

He pedaled off, leaving the EcoSapiens frozen in a tableau of moral anguish.

That afternoon, he jotted some notes in his dusty notebook:

> Observation #1: Burning Man is the only city on Earth where garbage is more taboo than nudity.
>
> Observation #2: Out here, trash isn't just physical — it's metaphysical.
>
> Observation #3: When you challenge someone's recycling system, you're not just questioning their bins — you're questioning their belief system.

He took a swig of warm electrolyte drink and smiled.

"Religion of Dust," he murmured. "And I've just committed blasphemy."

He grinned, equal parts guilty and delighted. The prank had worked, but he wanted more than flustered moralists — he wanted an official reaction. If the camps were the parishioners of this dust-covered faith, then surely the Rangers were its clergy.

It was time to take the gospel of garbage to City Hall.

***

By Day Three, Will's legend was beginning to circulate.

Someone at Center Camp had already chalked "Beware the Trash Man" on a whiteboard. Another camp had hung a sign that read "NO BINS — NOT EVEN IRONIC ONES."

Naturally, Will decided it was time to make things official.

He cycled toward Ranger HQ, the heart of Black Rock City's desert bureaucracy — a place where chaos came to file its paperwork. Rows of beige tents flapped like fatigued administrators, and a few Rangers stood in mirrored shades, radiating calm authority and mild caffeine deprivation.

Will parked, shouldered his trash bag, and approached the nearest one.

"Morning, officer," he said brightly. "I need to make a waste-management declaration."

The Ranger blinked. "A what?"

Will gestured at the bag. "I've been carrying this civic responsibility all week. I'd like to surrender it to the proper authorities."

The Ranger squinted. "You mean your trash?"

"Exactly. You're the proper authority, right?"

A pause.

Then, slowly: "There are no trash services here, partner. Pack it in, pack it out."

Will nodded, pen poised as if taking notes. "Right. But who do I report that to?"

Another Ranger joined in, sensing something brewing. "Sir, you report it to yourself."

"Excellent," Will said. "I'll need a form."

Both Rangers stared at him, expressionless in the dust-filtered light. One finally exhaled.

"Look, man, we don't do paperwork. We do community care."

Will lowered his voice conspiratorially. "So… hypothetically, if I buried this bag and built an art piece on top of it, would that be, say, conceptual recycling?"

That earned a visible twitch. "Absolutely not."

"Got it." He nodded gravely. "So that would be radical self-irresponsibility."

The first Ranger's lips tightened. The second began to smirk.

"Wait," she said, eyeing him. "You're that Trash Man guy, aren't you?"

Will tilted his head. "The rumors are greatly exaggerated."

She chuckled. "You know, half the city wants to lecture you, and the other half thinks you're performance art."

"I prefer to think of myself as community compost," he said.

She laughed — a short, surprised burst that broke the tension. The other Ranger shook his head but smiled despite himself.

"Alright, Trash Man," she said. "How about this — you keep your bag, you keep spreading the gospel, and we'll consider your paperwork… approved."

Will saluted. "Finally! Someone who understands the system."

As he pedaled away, he heard her call after him:

"Just remember, partner — even jokes leave footprints."

He raised the bag in salute. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm biodegradable."

***

By late afternoon, Will's prank had evolved from mischief into anthropology.

He'd been lectured by eco-evangelists and mildly threatened by a Ranger who looked like he'd just come from a meditation retreat.

He'd learned, empirically, that the only thing more dangerous than litter at Burning Man was irony.

Still, he sensed there must be a corner of this city capable of laughing at itself.

He found it at a camp whose hand-painted sign read "The Department of Reasonable Nonsense."

Under a patchwork tarp, a handful of dusty philosophers were sprawled on cushions around a half-melted hookah. Someone strummed a ukulele. Someone else wore a tutu made entirely of caution tape.

They looked like people who had already transcended the idea of taking anything seriously.

Will parked, hoisted his bag, and began his usual line:

"Hey folks—quick one. Where's your trash can?"

A pause.

Then a man with purple goggles sat up slowly.

"You mean… metaphorically?"

Will grinned. "Ideally, yes."

The group looked at one another and burst out laughing. One woman clapped her hands.

"Oh my God—you're him! You're the Trash Guy!"

"Allegedly."

"Dude, we've been waiting for you!" another shouted. "We built you a shrine."

He turned. Sure enough, in the corner sat a small altar: an upturned bucket draped in LED fairy lights, surrounded by offerings of fake banana peels, empty beer cans, and a single dusty flip-flop.

A cardboard plaque read: "Matter Out Of Place – Pray Here For Forgiveness."

Will laughed so hard he almost dropped the bag.

"You people get it," he said.

"Oh, we more than get it," said the woman in the tutu. "MOOP isn't just trash, it's truth. We're all just temporary debris pretending to be art."

Someone handed him a drink that tasted like tequila and warm enlightenment.

They toasted "to impermanence" and chanted mock-seriously:

> "Pack it in!
> Pack it out!

Leave no doubt!
Trash is clout!"

For the first time all week, Will wasn't the target of outrage but the catalyst for collective joy. The prank had become participation.

When he finally slung the bag back over his shoulder, the camp applauded.

One of them shouted after him, "Go forth, Trash Man! Spread confusion, not pollution!"

He pedaled off into the golden dust, smiling.

Maybe the joke wasn't on the Burn at all. Maybe the joke was the Burn—an endless invitation to take nothing too seriously, not even reverence itself.

And somewhere on the horizon, glowing like a mirage, he saw it: the Boeing 747 art car.

It gleamed in the dusk like a misplaced continent, engines silent, music pulsing from its belly.

If the Department of Reasonable Nonsense had been a temple, this was a cathedral.

***

Night descended in sequins and lasers.

The 747 loomed before him—a decommissioned jumbo jet reborn as a mobile nightclub, complete with stairs, balconies, and a cockpit DJ booth. The sight alone could make the most stoic soul believe in collective insanity.

Will parked his bike, adjusted his goggles, and hoisted his bag.

"This," he whispered to the trash, "is your boarding call."

He climbed the metal stairs into the plane. Inside, bass thundered, lights pulsed, and bodies shimmered under ultraviolet dust. A DJ dressed as a pilot was dropping beats at cruising altitude.

Will began pushing his way through the crowd, bag over his shoulder, politely saying "Excuse me, trash delivery," like a flight attendant from another dimension.

He reached the central aisle, looked up, and with perfect seriousness said:

"Where are the overhead bins?"

A nearby Burner blinked. "The what?"

"The overhead bins," Will repeated. "I just need to stow this until landing."

For a moment, no one reacted. Then someone screamed over the music:

"There are no trash cans at Burning Man!"

The crowd turned. Faces ranged from shock to amusement to full-blown theatrical horror.

One woman grabbed his arm: "You can't bring MOOP on a plane!"

Another man started laughing uncontrollably.

The DJ leaned into the mic: "Ladies and gentlemen, we appear to have a garbage emergency in the cabin."

Laughter erupted. Lights shifted to pulsing red. Someone handed Will a neon safety vest. Two mock "flight attendants" flanked him and guided him toward the exit like bouncers from a very polite fever dream.

As he reached the stairs, Will raised the bag high.

"Fear not!" he shouted. "The trash has been contained!"

The crowd cheered, half-booing, half-adoring. A chant started:

"Trash Man! Trash Man! Trash Man!"

Will bowed deeply. The prank had reached its crescendo: the perfect collision of satire, theatre, and communal laughter.

He dismounted the stairs, laughing so hard he could barely breathe. The dust swallowed him back into the desert, the roar of the crowd fading into the low hum of night.

As he rode away, he realized the joke had become folklore.

In a city with no bins, he'd somehow recycled laughter itself.

***

The following year, Will returned — this time not with a trash bag, but with an idea for an art car that refused to stay still.

He called it The Temple of Time — a collaboration of art, engineering, and technology born from the same subversive impulse that once made him ask where the trash can was.

Mounted on a rolling platform of white and chrome, with a great spiral clock at its heart, the Temple of Time offered something simple yet rare: a place to rest, to listen to music, to meet strangers and accomplices, to simply be.

It wasn't a temple in the traditional sense.

It was a reminder, echoing the words of Alan Watts that most of us live hypnotized by the illusion of time — chasing the future, replaying the past, and overlooking the only thing that's ever real: the present.

The installation travelled over 6,000 miles after Burning Man 2023, carrying that message to festivals and gatherings across the country. Everywhere it went, it invited people to stop counting minutes and start inhabiting them.

For Will, it felt like a natural evolution.

The prank that once exposed people's seriousness had matured into a structure that invited their stillness.

The Trash Man had built a Temple — not to mock time, but to remind us that it's always now.

The Tao of Toilets

Reflections from the throne of dust.

Every Burner, no matter how enlightened or dust-caked, eventually discovers that the true great equalizer on the playa isn't Center Camp or the Temple of Transcendence. It's the row of blue plastic cubicles shimmering in the sun like a line of sacred confessionals. The porta potties are where ideals meet intestines; where radical self-expression briefly bows to radical biology.

To the uninitiated, a porta potty might seem like a grim practicality, a fluorescent-blue reminder that utopia still has plumbing issues. But at Burning Man, even the lavatory becomes an art form. The "pimped-up" potties are marvels of desert décor—each one a micro-installation of mischief and care. You might step into a cubicle lit by strings of fairy lights, walls lined with glittering mirrors, and a faint waft of eucalyptus oil. Others feature hand-painted mandalas, disco balls, or absurdist poetry taped above the seat: "This too shall pass." One even had a shelf with wet wipes, hair ties, lip balm, and a jar of mints labelled "For afterwards."

It's strangely moving—the amount of thought people pour into beautifying a space meant for what we'd rather not mention. Maybe it's the ultimate Burning Man paradox: that in a city devoted to art, generosity finds its purest expression where no one's looking.

Good Rainbow learned that the benevolence of the playa sometimes reveals itself in the most undignified moments. One dusty afternoon she was on a frantic mission. Supplies had run out. She was tired, irritated, and scanning porta after porta in a kind of hygienic despair, each door swinging open to reveal the same barren emptiness—no pads, no tissues, no mercy. Under the punishing Nevada sun, she muttered a quiet plea to the universe. And, as the playa often does, the universe answered with theatre.

The next door she opened was a portal to paradise: a fully stocked sanctuary gleaming in blue light. Shelves of sanitary pads, tampons, wet wipes, deodorant spray, even a small vase with a fake sunflower. Someone had left a handwritten note taped to the wall: "Take what you need, goddess."

She stood there laughing, half-crying, half-marveling. In a city built on dust and improvisation, this little cubicle felt like a five-star miracle. She emerged moments later radiant, holding up a fresh pad like a relic from the Temple itself.

That's playa-dipity—the magic that arrives unannounced, ridiculous yet precise. Out here, the universe has a sense of humor. And sometimes it hides it in a toilet.

***

If the porta potties of Black Rock City are neon confessionals, then the long drops of AfrikaBurn are their monastic cousins. Gone are the LEDs, the mirrors, the floral air fresheners. Here, in the Tankwa Karoo, everything is stripped down to its elemental self — heat, dust, wood, and gravity.

A long drop is exactly what it sounds like: a raised wooden cubicle mounted over a sealed 1000-liter IBC-style waste container — a throne balanced above the slow alchemy of human output, heat, and microbes. Inside the tank, an activator fluid made of fruit oils and living microorganisms suppresses odor and begins the work of decomposition, transforming the festival's collective offering into future compost.

There's no flush, no water, no gentle blue chemicals swirling in consolation — just a bucket of sawdust and a scoop. It's less "sanitation solution" and more "philosophical statement." More compost heap than convenience.

It was my first AfrikaBurn, and Good Rainbow was showing me the ropes — or, in this case, the drops. The Tankwa sun doesn't shine so much as interrogate; it pierces through every layer of sunscreen and self-importance until you're nothing but a shimmering mirage of your former dignity. The air itself seems to hum with heat.

We approached the line of wooden cubicles rising like small fortresses against the desolation. "There," she said, pointing with the solemnity of a tour guide to the underworld. "Choose your destiny."

I climbed the steps, feeling like a pilgrim about to meet some ancient truth. The view was spectacular — a horizon so wide it made your thoughts feel

provincial. The desert stretched endlessly, scattered with distant shrubs that shimmered like hallucinations. I thought: If you have to relieve yourself, this is not a bad place to contemplate existence.

But the sun was merciless. So, ever the guardian angel, Good Rainbow stood outside my cubicle holding an umbrella over the open roof vent — a halo of shade in a world made of glare. From inside, I could see the silhouette of her arm and the umbrella handle like a bizarre religious icon: the Madonna of the Long Drop.

And that's when it happened.

Just as I was settling into my moment of dusty meditation, the door swung open. Two men in neon vests and wide smiles entered as if they were arriving at a garden party. "Howzit!" one of them chirped. "Just doing a quick clean!"

Before I could react, they were in full motion — replacing toilet rolls, sprinkling sawdust, spraying disinfectant, chatting cheerfully in Afrikaans. I sat frozen, trousers around my ankles, an unwilling participant in a surreal domestic ballet. They worked around me with the breezy efficiency of people who had long ceased to find anything about the human body surprising.

"Hot one today, hey?" said one, tightening a fresh roll onto its holder.

I nodded weakly. "Ya. Very."

Then, as quickly as they'd come, they were gone — whistling, moving on to the next cubicle, leaving behind a faint citrus smell and my lingering disbelief.

I sat there, suspended between mortification and wonder. In the default world, privacy is sacred; here, it was optional. And yet, something about their ease disarmed me. There was no judgment, no awkwardness — only a shared acceptance that the body has its business and that life goes on.

Out there in the blinding Tankwa light, dignity was just another costume to shed. What remained was laughter — that raw, humbling kind that sneaks up on you when there's nothing left to defend.

It turns out the long drop is not just a toilet. It's a teacher.

***

The next morning, I returned to the long drops feeling wiser. Humbled. A man reborn through sawdust and citrus spray.

The air was still, the heat already climbing. A line of cubicles stood before me, wooden doors slightly ajar, each one humming faintly with the smell of inevitability. I picked one at random, climbed the steps, and opened the door.

And froze.

There, in the middle of the floor, sat a pile. Not beside the hole. Not near the sawdust bucket. Just… there. A neat, defiant heap, gleaming faintly in the morning sun.

I stared. My brain refused to compute. It was as if someone had misread the entire concept of long drop and decided to stage a protest performance instead.

Behind me, footsteps on the wooden steps. A shadow fell across the doorway.

An older man, leathery skin, weathered hat, the casual ease of a veteran Afrikaburner. He peered over my shoulder, saw the scene, and nodded sagely.

"Pick it up," he said.

Just like that. Calm. Matter-of-fact. As though he'd suggested I fetch a spoon.

I blinked. "Sorry?"

He shrugged. "Radical self-reliance. Radical responsibility. If you see something, sort it."

Then he walked off, leaving me alone with philosophy and feces.

I stood there, paralyzed by the ethics of excrement. Part of me wanted to rise to the challenge — to prove my civic virtue, to embody the ethos of leave no trace. Another part of me, the part still faintly human, whispered, *Absolutely not.*

It became a moral standoff between my higher ideals and my lower instincts. On one side, the call of community stewardship. On the other, the ancient, unshakable truth that some messes simply aren't yours to handle.

I looked at the pile again. It looked back at me, smug and silent.

Eventually, I stepped back, closed the door gently, and moved to the next cubicle.

The seat was clean. The view was magnificent. The moral burden, lighter.

Later, I thought about that old man's words — *Pick it up.* At first, they sounded like orders. Now they felt like a koan. Every burn teaches you how far you're willing to go for the collective good, how much of yourself you'll give before you draw a line. Radical responsibility sounds noble until it smells real.

Somewhere between the compost pit and the desert sky, I realized: utopia is easy until it asks for your hands.

***

If there's one thing the desert teaches, it's logistics. Out here, every bodily function requires forethought, choreography, and an unsentimental relationship with plastic.

At Burning Man, you can't just wander out into the dust and relieve yourself in the dust. (Though, I once saw a guy, after the Man Burn, stumbling across the dark playa with his peepee out, spraying urine all over the place like a misguided performance artist — that's just not the done thing.)

The *Leave No Trace* principle is absolute: nothing leaves the body without a designated destination. Which means learning the fine art of pee bottles, pee funnels, and the thousand tiny rituals of desert self-containment.

The playa, being alkaline and delicate, doesn't absorb liquid—it preserves it. Every drop you leave behind becomes a chemical love letter to future archaeologists. So we carry our bottles, labelled and sacred, like pilgrims with portable shrines. Some are simple Gatorade containers; others are gleaming, customized vessels decorated with LEDs or stickers that read "When nature calls, I answer responsibly."

Then there are the funnels. Ingenious devices of liberation and equality, turning urination into a hands-free act of feminist triumph. You'd hear

women in camps discussing brands and angles with the same precision engineers reserve for jet propulsion. Nothing builds sisterhood like a shared understanding of aim.

Still, even with all this innovation, there are moments when biology rebels, when dignity falters, and when the absurdity of it all turns cosmic.

Like the day of the Porta Paparazzi.

***

It was late afternoon at AfrikaBurn. The sun was slipping behind a haze of dust, turning everything gold and theatrical. The long drops stood in a neat line, their wooden silhouettes glowing like rustic cathedrals. Somewhere in the distance, an art car was blasting triumphant classical music — I think it was Handel or maybe Vivaldi — something regal enough to make the air itself seem important.

Then the door opened.

A man stepped out, mid-thirties, sunburned, bare-chested, wearing nothing but shorts, a utility belt, and the expression of someone who had just survived an exorcism. He exhaled audibly, eyes closed, face lifted to the heavens in bliss. The music swelled at the exact moment he emerged — strings rising, brass flaring, the sun breaking through the cloud as if the universe had queued the moment just for him.

And waiting for him — because this is AfrikaBurn — was a red carpet.

Not metaphorically. An *actual* red carpet had been rolled out by a group calling themselves the Porta Paparazzi. Armed with cameras, feather boas, and fake microphones, they leapt into action the instant the door swung open.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" one of them shouted. "We have our hero!"

Flashbulbs popped. Cheers erupted. Someone yelled, "How was the performance?"

The man froze for a second, blinking in disbelief. Then, like a seasoned star, he straightened up, ran his hands through his hair, and stepped onto the carpet.

The crowd went wild.

He strutted. He waved regally. He blew kisses. He posed for selfies with strangers who shouted his name as if he'd just won an Oscar for Best Evacuation. The classical music soared to its finale. He bowed. He laughed. And for a brief, shining moment, we were all united — a cheering crowd celebrating the most universal act in human history.

I remember thinking: *Only here*. Only in this absurd crucible of dust and art and unfiltered humanity could something so basic become theatre, could the banal be turned into beatitude.

The Porta Paparazzi understood the secret of the burn — that everything, even the most inglorious necessity, can be transformed with a bit of humour and a touch of light. Out here, even defecation can have an encore.

***

After the furnace of the Tankwa, the Netherlands Burn felt almost mythical — a place invented by water to remind the earth what mercy looked like. Green everywhere. Mist on the grass. Cows grazing in slow motion as if auditioning for a meditation app.

Driving into *Where the Sheep Sleeps* felt like arriving in a parallel universe where the Burn had been politely translated for Western Europe. Gone was the raw austerity of the Karoo, the cracked soil and bone-white sky. Here the air was cool, damp, forgiving. Even the dust seemed house-trained.

And then there were the toilets.

Not long drops, not blue plastic boxes — *actual toilets*. Flushing, porcelain, obedient to the gentle press of a button. Stainless-steel sinks with running water. Soap dispensers that released measured squirts of lavender-scented civility. Mirrors that reflected faces instead of filth. Someone had placed a vase of tulips on the counter, because of course they had.

It was lovely. It was luxurious. And it was disorienting.

I stood washing my hands, half expecting a cleaner to burst in with sawdust or a photographer to appear with a flashbulb. Instead there was silence, soft and respectable, broken only by the sound of water swirling away — a small, modern miracle that required no thought, no gratitude.

After weeks of sawdust and sun, this civility felt almost illicit. I found myself flushing twice, partly from habit, partly from guilt. Comfort, once lost and rediscovered, comes tinged with suspicion. I missed the rough intimacy of the long drops, the humour that bloomed out of shared discomfort. In the Tankwa, every trip to the toilet felt like a minor adventure — a test of endurance, a reminder of the body's democracy. Here, it was just plumbing. Efficient, invisible, unremarkable.

And yet, even in its neatness, the toilet said something about the culture that built it. Every Burn mirrors its landscape. Black Rock's porta potties pulse with creativity and chaos. The Tankwa's long drops embody grit and communal pragmatism. The Dutch toilets, like their fields, are orderly, cultivated, clean — the human urge to manage nature brought to its fragrant, functional perfection.

Standing there, surrounded by tiles instead of dust, I realized that each Burn designs its own kind of dignity. In Nevada, dignity is decorated; in South Africa, it's endured; in the Netherlands, it's engineered.

And somewhere in between — between the flush and the sawdust, the lavender, and the flies — lies the truest reflection of who we are when we think no one's watching.

***

After all the temples of dust and disco, I realized the most democratic spaces at any Burn weren't the dance floors or the domes — they were the toilets.

Those cubicles, whether made of plastic, plywood, or porcelain, are humanity's true confessionals. They remind us that for all our art, our principles, and our philosophy, we remain obedient to the body. The toilets, in their strange variety, had taught me gratitude for water, reverence for those

who clean, and the kind of humility that dissolves self-importance faster than any workshop on mindfulness ever could.

But beyond the comedy and chaos, they hinted at something deeper — the raw, existential absurdity of being human.

It brought to mind a passage from Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, which, read in the glow of a porta-potty vent, feels both horrifying and oddly consoling:

> *Defecation represents man's utter bafflement at the sheer non-sense of creation: to fashion the sublime miracle of the human face, the mysterium tremendum of radiant feminine beauty, the veritable goddesses that beautiful women are; to bring this all out of nothing, out of the void, and make it shine in noonday; to take such a miracle and put miracles again within it, deep in the mystery of eyes that peer out — the eye that gave even the dry Darwin a chill; to do all this, and to combine it with an anus that shits! It is too much. Nature mocks us, and poets live in torture.*

Becker captures the impossible joke of existence — that the same intelligence capable of poetry, symphonies, and temples also designed a digestive tract. At Burning Man, you can't hide from that duality. You witness it in the same person who spends days constructing a 40-foot phoenix, then queues politely for a plastic cubicle with a roll of single-ply. It's humbling. It's ridiculous. It's profoundly human.

> *Once admit that you are a defecating creature then you invite the primeval ocean of creature anxiety to flood over you. But it is more than creature anxiety, it is also man's anxiety, the anxiety that results from the human paradox that man is an animal who is conscious of his animal limitation. Anxiety is the result of the perception of the truth of one's condition. What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous.*

There's a moment, crouched above a long drop under the African sun or perched in a blue box in Nevada, when Becker's "self-conscious animal" makes perfect sense.

You are an ape with self-awareness — a thinking creature forced to confront its own plumbing. It's both comic and cosmic. Every scoop of sawdust becomes a reminder that awareness itself is a burden: the knowledge that you are temporary, that the miracle leaks, that your body is a comedy performed against eternity.

> *It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression — and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God.*

Burns strip away distraction until that truth hums beneath everything — under the costumes, under the lights, under the laughter. You sense it in the dust, in the silence after the burn, in the fragility of the body that builds and dances and disintegrates. Out here, we rebel not through denial, but through celebration. If life is a hoax, we've decided to be in on the joke.

> *What kind of deity would create such complex and fancy worm food? Cynical deities, said the Greeks, who use man's torments for their own amusement.*

Becker calls them cynical deities. I like to imagine them as playful ones — tricksters who hand us art supplies, hormones, and a digestive system, then sit back to see what we'll make of the combination.

And somehow, in the dust and absurdity, we do make something of it. We make laughter. We make friendship. We make beauty out of excrement and light.

So yes — perhaps the deities are amused. But maybe they're also proud that we learned to find grace, even here, where the sublime and the scatological share the same seat.

The Spotlight and the Shadow

When freedom forgets it's being watched.

It was close to 2 a.m. when Eskimo and I were walking back to camp — that soft, in-between hour when even the dust seems to sigh. We'd spent the evening drifting between art cars, our goggles crusted with alkali and our brains pleasantly frayed by light and sound. The playa was thinning; the city's pulse had slowed to a low, luminous hum.

As we cut past a row of porta-potties, we noticed an intense white light slicing through the darkness — a single portable floodlight trained, inexplicably, on a small patch of dust. There, in the middle of that cone of illumination, stood a young woman in black leather. Kneeling before her was a man — anonymous in the glare, motionless but for his head.

For a second we thought it was performance art: the exaggerated lighting, the stillness, the cinematic framing. But as we drew nearer, the tableau became unmistakably explicit. She was performing oral sex on him, or rather, performing *something* that straddled the border between erotic ritual and absurdist theatre — out there in the open, beside the toilets, bathed in blinding light.

We didn't stop. We didn't comment. We simply walked on, each of us silently registering the surreal collision of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and art-school bravado. Later, back at camp, Eskimo muttered, "Was that… a statement?"

That's the question that stayed with me. What was that? A spontaneous act of passion? A planned piece? A protest against shame? Or just two people, lost in the limitless permission of the playa, testing where freedom blurs into performance?

It made me think about *radical self-expression* — one of Burning Man's most cherished and misunderstood principles — and the strange alchemy of liberty and restraint that keeps the city from dissolving into chaos.

***

Burning Man's founder, Larry Harvey, described *radical self-expression* as the act of offering one's unique gifts to the community — not an excuse to shock, offend, or disregard consent, but an invitation to participate authentically. "It arises from the unique gifts of the individual," he wrote, "but the gift is offered to others." In other words, self-expression at Burning Man is relational: it exists in conversation with everyone who shares the dust.

The founders have often said that public sex and nudity were never the point of the event, even if both are visible features of its landscape. Harvey once remarked that Burning Man "isn't about libertinism — it's about liberty." Freedom of body and mind, yes, but grounded in mutual respect and choice.

That ethos extends to the *Orgy Dome*, perhaps the most famous — and most misunderstood — structure on the playa. Run by a long-standing collective called *And Then There's Only Love*, it's not a free-for-all bacchanal but a managed, consent-driven space. Couples (or groups) enter together; sobriety and verbal consent are mandatory; there are boundaries, rules, and attendants to ensure safety and comfort. Within those walls, sexuality is treated as a form of connection and exploration — not performance for spectators.

Outside those spaces, public sex is relatively rare. The vast majority of Burners are fully clothed (albeit creatively), and even when they're nude, it's rarely eroticized. Nudity on the playa is almost banal — a practical response to heat, dust, and costume fatigue. What's striking isn't exposure but acceptance. You'll see bodies of every shape and age — painted, powdered, or plain — moving through the dust with a kind of quiet dignity.

That's the magic of it: no body-shaming, no judgment. Everyone is welcome. Once, I saw a man scream cruelly at a semi-nude woman, "No one wants to see your fat ass!" It was one of the ugliest things I've ever heard at Burning Man — precisely because it was so anomalous. The people nearby froze in disbelief. It violated the unspoken pact of kindness that undergirds radical inclusion. Yes, there are jerks in every temporary city, but they're the exception. The playa's social immune system tends to reject them fast.

Still, that moment by the porta-potties reminded me that even here, freedom isn't infinite. Every principle — *self-expression, inclusion, immediacy* — collides at the edges. And in those collisions, you find the real texture of Burning Man: the negotiation between liberty and respect, between desire and dignity, between what we reveal and what we restrain.

***

The longer I go to Burning Man, the more I realise that *radical self-expression* isn't really about flamboyance. It's about honesty. The courage to reveal something essential — a desire, a joy, a grief — and trust that it will be received without ridicule. But that trust is also what makes the principle fragile.

The moment by the porta-potties wasn't shocking because it was sexual. It was shocking because it felt uninvited. There was no sense of gift or participation — just exposure. Maybe it was a spontaneous act of lust. Maybe it was a prank, a filmed performance, or a piece of anti-art aimed at provoking discomfort. Or maybe it was simply two humans lost in a trance of permission, unaware that the spotlight had turned them into a stage.

Either way, it made me think about how easily liberation tips into spectacle when empathy falls away. At Burning Man, every act of expression carries an implicit contract: freedom offered in a field of consent. When we forget that, we stop co-creating and start intruding.

The playa has a way of reminding you that even utopias need boundaries. The Ten Principles aren't commandments; they're counterweights. Radical Inclusion without respect becomes chaos; Radical Self-Expression without consent becomes aggression. The dust teaches this quietly — through awkward moments, through small transgressions, through the feeling you get when something doesn't sit right in your gut.

Walking back that night, Eskimo and I didn't moralize. We just kept replaying the image — the bright light, the strange stillness, the uneasy beauty of it all. In a city built on permission, it's natural to test the perimeter of what's allowed. But the deeper lesson, I think, is that the most profound acts of expression are those that awaken connection, not alienation.

Maybe that's why the best art at Burning Man isn't the loudest or the most naked. It's the art that leaves you feeling more *aware* — of others, of yourself, of the invisible lines that hold a community together.

The Silent Chamber

Sometimes the holiest thing you can do is laugh.

I don't know if this story really happened.

Like most things that survive long enough to become playa legend, it's probably part truth, part mirage — a tale told around campfires, refined in the retelling, its edges burnished by dust and affection.

But it goes like this:

Two older men — grizzled veterans of the Burn — were seen walking through the Temple one year. It was late afternoon, that quiet hour when the desert light turns amber and the Temple becomes a cathedral of silence. People were weeping, meditating, holding hands, leaving notes to the dead. Every sound felt amplified — the creak of plywood, the whisper of a pen, the small catch in someone's breath.

And then, among all that stillness, came a sound that didn't belong.

Laughter.

Soft at first, then unmistakable.

Someone nearby, startled out of their reverence, turned and scolded them:

"Hey! Don't you know this is a sacred place?"

The men stopped. Looked at each other.

And then — as if that made it even funnier — they laughed harder.

Still laughing, they nodded politely to their accuser, and walked out into the sun.

It wasn't until later that someone recognized who they were: Larry Harvey, the founder of Burning Man, and Michael Mikel, one of the original organizers.

***

The story lingers because it feels like a koan — a riddle disguised as mischief. The Temple is the emotional heart of Burning Man, a yearly act of communal mourning. Every August, thousands of Burners pour their grief into wood and ink — love letters, apologies, prayers, ashes. The Temple Burn at week's end is not celebratory; it's silent, reverent, almost unbearable in its beauty. As the structure collapses into flame, 80,000 people stand motionless, and you can feel the entire desert holding its breath.

To laugh in that space sounds almost blasphemous. And yet — perhaps that's the point.

Harvey often said that Burning Man was not a religion but a culture — one that thrives on paradox. "We are all of us the makers of meaning," he wrote, "and no one owns the sacred." The Temple, though spiritual, isn't consecrated ground. It's built anew each year, consecrated only by participation. Its sanctity comes from impermanence.

Maybe that's what made the two men laugh: the absurdity of being told what not to feel in a place meant to hold everything.

The Burn's founders knew that humour was a safeguard against sanctimony. Larry once quipped that if the Burn ever became too pious, he'd have to "start another fire." The city of dust was never meant to be a cathedral — it was a carnival that stumbled into transcendence.

In that sense, the Temple is Burning Man's great contradiction: the one structure that doesn't celebrate chaos but collects sorrow. Yet even here, laughter has a place. Because grief and joy, absurdity and awe, are not opposites on the playa — they're dance partners.

When those men laughed, they weren't mocking the mourners; they were reminding us that reverence without play becomes rigidity. That even in the house of loss, levity is not betrayal. That laughter, too, can be a kind of prayer.

I've been inside the Temple many times. I've seen people collapse in tears, fall silent before a single word scrawled on wood, or cradle the ashes of someone they loved. I've left messages myself — some for the living, some for ghosts. Each year, as the structure burns, I feel something leave me too.

But I've also seen strangers smile through tears, share food, tell stories, even crack jokes under that lattice of grief. There's something profoundly human in that — the refusal to let sorrow monopolize the sacred.

So when I think of Larry and Michael walking out of the Temple laughing, I imagine it wasn't defiance — it was gratitude. Gratitude that the community they'd helped build had learned to make room for every part of the human condition: the tragic, the tender, and the absurd.

Maybe that's the real moral of the legend: that the Temple isn't holy because it forbids laughter, but because it forgives it.

Out on the playa, holiness is temporary. Everything sacred ends up burning — the Man, the Temple, the stories. What survives are gestures: a laugh, a tear, a shared silence.

And maybe that's why I hope the story *is* true. Because if the founders could laugh in the Temple, it means they understood something vital — that even the most sacred spaces are still part of the same great joke.

The Bumble Bee Wedding

When love hitched a ride across the dust.

Mornings at *Bob and the Beatles* always began somewhere between chaos and genius. Someone's coffee would explode from a French press, a guitar would start tuning itself, and a hangover-cured philosopher would begin explaining quantum love to whoever was still awake. The Tankwa sun was already flexing its authority, and a fine film of dust settled on everything that dared to exist.

That morning, though, there was purpose in the madness. *Tim and Chrissie are getting married today,* I announced, holding a clipboard I didn't need, "and we have absolutely no ride."

It was, after all, AfrikaBurn — Burning Man's mischievous southern cousin — and nothing ever went exactly to plan.

Tim looked like Terence McKenna after a healthy dose of optimism — the kind of man who could wax philosophical about the multiverse while fixing a generator with a piece of string. Chrissie, on the other hand, carried the serene authority of a head girl who somehow ended up in the wrong school — the one with more glitter than governance. Together, they were the perfect Burner couple: equal parts cosmic and competent. They'd been together for years, drifting between festivals and real life, and had finally decided to make it official — dust, chaos, and all.

The problem was distance. The playa here was a cracked bowl of sun and shimmer; walking a bride in full regalia across it felt less like romance and more like a pilgrimage through purgatory. We needed an art car. Not just any vehicle — a *worthy* one. Something with myth in its engine, shimmer in its chassis, and space for at least one helium balloon.

Every AfrikaBurn wedding, I've come to realise, starts as a logistical nightmare disguised as divine choreography.

And this one was no exception.

***

Good Rainbow and I scanned the horizon like generals on a foolish campaign. The plan, such as it was, involved optimism, dust goggles, and absolutely no backup strategy. Good Rainbow and I set out from *Bob and the Beatles* on mismatched bikes that squeaked like asthmatic flamingos. The sun was already high enough to toast reason itself.

Our first stop was the Spirit Train — that glorious, thundering locomotive of light and bass. It looked like something Da Vinci would've built after a long night at a drum circle. We approached the crew with the humility of pilgrims seeking a miracle. "Wedding transport," I explained, "two souls, one ceremony, minimal MOOP." The conductor smiled, shook his head, and pointed to a clipboard that looked like the waiting list for reincarnation. "Booked solid, bru," he said.

Undeterred, we rolled on to other legends: the Tankwa Phoenix, the Nautilus, Molly the Mollusc, even that ridiculous pirate galleon with the bubble cannons. Same answer each time — booked, broken, or already committed to someone else's myth. Every rejection made the mission feel more sacred, more absurd. The playa was testing us, and like all good trickster gods, it was doing it with a smile.

At one point, Good Rainbow turned to me and said, "Maybe love should just walk." I looked at the endless shimmer of dust and replied, "Maybe not in those shoes."

By late afternoon, our optimism was melting faster than the ice in our camp cooler. We sat beside a twisted metal sculpture shaped like a heart and contemplated failure. And then, out of the glare, came a vision: a small yellow Bumble Bee art car, complete with painted stripes, fluttering wings, and a cheerful Ukrainian couple at the helm. It was absurd, perfect, and utterly out of a children's dream.

Good Rainbow grinned. "The Spirit Train said no," she said, "but the Bumble Bee said yes."

Sometimes the playa doesn't give you what you want.
It gives you something sweeter, smaller, and infinitely more fitting.

***

The Ukrainian couple introduced themselves as Mira and Anton, and within moments we adored them. They looked like they'd rolled straight out of a Wes Anderson film — sunburned, smiling, and utterly sincere. Their Bumble Bee art car was tiny compared to the desert behemoths we'd been rejected by, but it had soul. The body was painted bright yellow with black stripes that shimmered in the sun. Two metal wings jutted from the sides, and a soft hum of ambient music buzzed from hidden speakers. It was ridiculous and perfect.

When we explained the situation — the wedding, the missing transport, the bride and groom stranded at Bob and the Beatles — they didn't hesitate. "Of course," said Mira, her accent lilting like sunlight through lace. "For love, we drive anywhere."

By evening, the camp was a flurry of preparation. We filled helium balloons with monk-like precision, aware of the sacred law of No MOOP. Someone produced a bottle of cold gin from a melted cooler; someone else attached ribbons to the Bee's wings. The air shimmered gold as the sun began its descent behind the Karoo hills.

Then the procession began. The Bumble Bee rumbled across the playa, wings fluttering, music gently pulsing. Tim and Chrissie sat regally in the back, her veil fluttering like a signal flag to the gods, his smile half McKenna mystic, half man-in-love. Around them, bikes formed a loose orbit; a few burners on stilts waved; someone shouted blessings through a megaphone.

It wasn't the Spirit Train, but it was better — smaller, humbler, infinitely more human. The Bee buzzed toward the horizon, pulling behind it a trail of laughter, light, and low-flying balloons.

Somewhere between absurdity and grace, the wedding was already perfect.

***

Dust swirled around us in golden spirals. The helium balloons bobbed above like a constellation of small, defiant suns. The desert wind carried the smell of sage and distant fire.

Somewhere out there, across kilometers of cracked clay and chaos, stood the Dreamcatcher — the chosen wedding site. Or at least, one of them. There

were, unhelpfully, three Dreamcatcher installations that year, scattered across the desert like a cosmic prank. Directions were vague, confidence was low, and radio signals were mostly wishful thinking.

Communication was limited to hopeful hand gestures and radio static.

"Are you at the Dreamcatcher?"

"Yes!"

"Which one?"

"The big one!"

"They're *all* big ones!"

Confusion abounded. But nobody cared. We were in motion.

The Bee was humming. The light was perfect.

And for one brief, improbable hour, love had its own transportation system.

***

We passed bewildered clusters of friends waiting at the wrong altars — waving champagne bottles, holding wilted flowers, shrugging philosophically. Then, finally, through the haze, we saw it: the right Dreamcatcher. A huge wooden ring suspended between two towers, webbed with rope that glowed gold in the dying light. It shimmered like a portal to somewhere softer than the world we knew.

The Bee rolled to a stop, buzzing into reverent silence. Tim and Chrissie climbed down, radiant and dusty, greeted by cheers from those who'd managed to divine the correct coordinates. Our Mexican friend Kai stood ready to officiate, part priest, part trickster sage, wearing a hat that seemed designed to confuse theology.

He began with that wonderful mix of gravity and nonsense only a true Burner can pull off. He spoke about love as the most radical form of inclusion, about finding stillness in chaos and devotion in dust. Tim nodded thoughtfully,

clearly running his own silent commentary on the metaphysics of it all. Chrissie beamed — calm and grounded.

When the vows were said and the cheering subsided, Kai called for the Cinnamon Roll Hug — a tradition that can only be described as group transcendence through mild suffocation. Everyone linked arms and began to spiral inward, wrapping around the couple in concentric circles until we became a single, swaying organism of love and dust. Someone yelled, "Tighter!" Someone else shouted, "I can't breathe but I've never felt closer to anyone!" Laughter broke the solemnity, and for a moment the whole playa seemed to vibrate with warmth.

When we finally uncoiled, dusk had turned to indigo. The Bee glowed softly nearby, its wings catching the first traces of moonlight. Kai raised a cup — something vaguely gin-adjacent — and toasted the newlyweds.

It wasn't polished or choreographed. It was improvised, dusty, and perfectly human — the kind of ceremony that could only happen here, in a temporary city where even confusion feels like participation.

***

As night settled over the desert, the crowd began to drift away — some on bikes, some on foot, all glowing faintly in the moonlight. The laughter softened into the hum of distant sound camps, the kind of low, heartbeat bass that makes the air itself feel alive.

The Bumble Bee idled patiently nearby, its little wings trembling in the breeze. We climbed aboard and began the slow ride back across the cracked clay, the newlyweds holding hands, the last of the helium balloons bobbing behind us like drifting stars.

Somewhere along the way, one slipped free. We watched it rise higher and higher until it disappeared into the darkness — one tiny, luminous promise released to the wind.

The playa was silent for a moment. Then someone whispered, "May it never land."

And that was it. The wedding was over.

But the feeling — that strange, shimmering mix of dust, laughter, and love — lingered, suspended somewhere between the stars and the sand.

Planetary Misalignment

The night we saw Pluto

The night was one of those perfect Tankwa evenings when the dust hung low and the horizon pulsed with art and fire. Good Rainbow and I wandered the Binnekring, AfrikaBurn's glowing artery — that wild circular boulevard where music, madness, and miracles overlap like badly tuned frequencies.

Every few meters, a new reality unfolded: a spinning neon jellyfish, a steel phoenix spewing fire, a group of naked dancers illuminated by strobe light that made them look like ghosts caught mid-laughter. The air was electric with possibility — that sweet, delirious sense that absolutely *anything* could happen next.

We drifted between installations, sipping something that may once have been gin, when a stranger appeared out of the smoke and asked, "Hey, do you want to see Pluto?"

I stopped. Of all the invitations one gets at a burn, that one felt oddly specific.

"As in... the *planet*?" I asked.

He nodded.

Now, as someone who's spent far too many nights hunched over telescopes in the desert, I knew you can't just *see* Pluto. Not without at least a small observatory, a large telescope, and an even larger ego. The idea was absurd — and therefore, irresistible.

Good Rainbow grinned. "Why not?" she said. "We're already on another planet."

And with that, we followed him into the dust.

***

As we followed our mysterious guide deeper into the Binnekring, the rational part of my brain began waving a small red flag. You can't just "see" Pluto. That's not how the universe—or optics—works.

For starters, Pluto shines at a feeble magnitude 14.4. To put that in context, it's about 1,600 times dimmer than the faintest stars the human eye can detect on a moonless night. Even most decent backyard telescopes struggle. You don't so much see Pluto as confirm its statistical existence after several long-exposure photographs and an argument about whether that smudge moved since last Tuesday.

Then there's the distance. Pluto drifts roughly 5.9 billion kilometers from the Sun—so far away that sunlight takes nearly five and a half hours to reach it. It's been out there quietly minding its business since Clyde Tombaugh discovered it in 1930, and in all that time it still hasn't completed a single orbit. One Plutonian year lasts 248 Earth years. By the time it finishes one lap around the Sun, everyone currently alive will have been reincarnated as AI avatars arguing about the same thing on different platforms.

And of course, there's Pluto's identity crisis. The International Astronomical Union famously demoted it in 2006, declaring it a dwarf planet because it hadn't "cleared its neighborhood." Which is a polite way of saying it shares its orbital path with other icy misfits in the Kuiper Belt.

Pluto, I've always thought, is like that ex-planet who still shows up at reunions insisting they were once a big deal.

So yes, the astronomer in me knew what we were walking toward was impossible. But the Burner in me suspected impossibility was precisely the point.

***

The man's directions were delivered with the serene confidence of a prophet and the precision of a drunk pirate.

"Go past the jellyfish car," he said, pointing vaguely into the glowing night. "Then left at the giraffe that lights up. You'll hear music. Not the loud music — the other music. That's where the telescope to see Pluto is."

Good Rainbow and I exchanged the look of two people who had both seen enough burns to know that this could lead anywhere — a miracle, a meltdown, or a mediocre art installation. Still, curiosity has a gravitational pull all its own, and besides, how often do you get invited to meet a planet?

We pedaled off into the night, our bikes creaking through clouds of amber dust. The Binnekring at midnight is its own dimension: flames flickering from sculptures, lasers cutting through haze, silhouettes of dancers swirling in slow motion. Somewhere, a saxophone solo competed with techno. Somewhere else, a man in a cape was reciting Rumi to a confused robot.

Each landmark in the stranger's directions materialized like checkpoints in a lucid dream: the jellyfish car, tentacles glowing blue; the giraffe, radiant and impossible to miss. Beyond it, the music softened to a strange cosmic hum.

Part of me hoped I was wrong — that someone, somewhere, had actually hauled a serious telescope into the desert. That amid all this dust and delirium, we might, for once, glimpse something truly celestial.

We found the camp tucked between two flame-throwing sculptures and a bar that specialized in existential margaritas. Fairy lights looped across shade cloths, and a dozen people sat in a semicircle, sipping from tin mugs and staring expectantly at a small telescope perched on a wobbly tripod.

"There it is," said our guide proudly. "Pluto."

I approached the telescope with the reverence one reserves for sacred relics and unwise science experiments. It was the kind of beginner's scope you buy for a child who once pointed at the Moon and said, *I want to be an astronaut.* A sweet gesture, but not, by any stretch, the kind of instrument capable of resolving an object 5.9 billion kilometers away.

Still, the campers were adamant. "You can totally see Pluto through this one," said a woman in sequined goggles. "It's mind-blowing." Another nodded solemnly. "You have to look with your *heart,* not your eyes."

Good Rainbow shot me a grin that said, *You asked for this, Professor.*

I hesitated. Every rational neuron in my brain protested. But there's a rule on the playa — if someone offers you wonder, you accept. So I crouched down, adjusted the focus knob that wasn't connected to anything in particular, and pressed my eye to the eyepiece.

The world went still. The music faded. The dust held its breath. For a fleeting second, I thought—just maybe—the impossible had happened.

And there it was.

A blur of color. A flicker of light. My heart did a small, involuntary leap — that half-second before reason catches up with hope. I adjusted the focus, held my breath, squinted deeper into the eyepiece…

…and burst out laughing.

Inside the telescope, lovingly taped to the inner lens cap, was a laminated picture of Pluto — the Disney dog — tongue out, tail wagging, looking up adoringly at Goofy, who, of course, is also a dog. The cosmic hierarchy made no sense whatsoever, which only made it funnier.

For a second, I just stared — suspended somewhere between disbelief and delight — before the absurdity detonated. I laughed so hard I nearly fell over, tears mixing with dust.

The camp erupted in laughter. Someone rang a bicycle bell in triumph. A woman in a silver cape shouted, "Behold! The ninth planet revealed!"

Good Rainbow doubled over, tears streaking the dust on her cheeks. I couldn't stop laughing — a full-body, cathartic, cosmic laugh that left me gasping. It was perfect. The setup, the sincerity, the execution — flawless.

I'd spent years guiding people through the real night sky, teaching them to find Jupiter's moons, Saturn's rings, the faint shimmer of the Andromeda Galaxy. And yet here, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by strangers and dust, I'd just had the most memorable stargazing experience of my life.

I thanked the camp for their brilliance — their prank was pure playa: clever, communal, and ridiculous in exactly the right proportions.

As we rode away, still laughing, Good Rainbow said, "See? You *did* find Pluto."

I looked up at the sky, where the real one drifted unseen in its slow, frozen orbit, and smiled.

Sometimes the universe gives you wisdom.

Sometimes it gives you a cartoon dog.

Exodus: A Tale of Three Exits

The temple falls, the dust settles, and the journey home begins

Burning Man does not end with fireworks or fanfare. It ends with fire and silence. On Saturday night, the Man is burned in a carnival of flames and celebration — music thunders, art cars circle, and tens of thousands of Burners cheer as the effigy collapses into embers. But on Sunday night, the mood shifts. The Temple burns. It is a different kind of gathering — hushed, reverent, thousands sitting in stillness as the structure, heavy with memorials and messages, disappears into the night sky. If the Man Burn is a party, the Temple Burn is a prayer.

And then comes Monday. The city begins to dissolve. Camps are dismantled, domes are packed, towers and sculptures reduced to bare frames of metal. The playa, which only hours before had been a glowing hive of sound and color, starts to look barren and skeletal. People speak of Exodus not just as a drive home but as a final ritual of the Burn itself — a gauntlet of dust, patience, absurdity, and endurance.

Tens of thousands of vehicles converge onto a single dirt road leading out of Black Rock City. At peak times, the line can stretch for miles. Hours turn into half-days, half-days into nights. Cars overheat, RVs break down, bicycles wobble alongside idling vehicles. Strangers share snacks, trade stories, or simply sit in meditative silence as the city slowly breathes out its citizens.

It's bittersweet. Every Burner knows that as the Temple burns, the city is already dying. By Monday, the exodus is both literal and symbolic: the moment when you must say goodbye to this fragile, temporary world and re-enter the so-called "default" one. And like everything at Burning Man, Exodus is never the same twice — sometimes it's a slow-motion ordeal, sometimes it's comedy, sometimes it's grace.

In 2022, Black Rock City felt swollen with life. After two years of silence during the pandemic, the Burn returned, and it seemed as though the whole world had shown up at once. The population pushed the city to its edges — every camp brimming, every street alive, every sound system competing with another for space in the desert night. There was a manic joy in the air, the

kind that comes after deprivation: a hunger to dance, to build, to create, to be together again.

Leaving such a place was always going to feel impossible. But Exodus that year turned it into something else entirely — an endurance ritual.

My wife, Good Rainbow, and I pulled out at 3 p.m. on Monday, expecting a half-day crawl. Instead, it took nearly 14 hours just to reach the tarmac, finally rolling onto the road at 5 a.m. Tuesday. The line of headlights stretched endlessly into the night, a glowing serpent of RVs, cars, and bicycles weaving through the dust.

Yet the wait never felt like a burden. It was simply another part of the Burn — a final ritual of patience, dust, and surrender. We accepted it completely, chatting, sharing food, watching stars, and dozing in shifts. By the time we reached pavement, it felt less like an ordeal than an epilogue — the playa's long goodbye.

***

The following year, 2023, brought a very different kind of challenge. If 2022 was about enduring the long crawl out of the city, this time it was the weather itself that transformed the experience.

It began on Friday morning, almost without warning. A few drops at first, then a steady drizzle that turned the powdery dust of the playa into a slick, sticky paste. Within hours, the entire desert floor had transformed into a vast mudscape. Bicycles became useless, shoes were swallowed whole, and every step demanded effort as the ground clung to you like wet cement.

The rangers came on the radio with calm but firm instructions: stay put, shelter in place, and don't attempt to drive. And we did. Camps hunkered down, and what might have been frustration in any other setting turned instead into something strangely beautiful. Strangers became allies, neighbors shared food and warmth, and a sense of collective resilience took root. There was laughter in the struggle, jokes about "Rain Burn," and the quiet recognition that this too was part of the Burn experience. Burning Man had always been about surrendering control, about saying yes to whatever the desert delivered. And so, we accepted it completely.

By Sunday morning, the rain still hadn't fully let up. The playa remained a mess of clay and puddles, and the uncertainty about when the roads would reopen hung heavy in the air. Part of me wanted to stay — to sink deeper into the camaraderie that had blossomed in camp, to embrace the unpredictability as just another Burn lesson. Many of my friends did exactly that, content to wait it out.

But I couldn't. I had flights to catch — not just one, but a long chain of connections that would eventually take me back to Dubai. Missing the first meant watching the rest unravel. And so, while the others settled into their makeshift routines, I found myself listening intently to the crackling voices on the Burner radio.

That's when the announcement came: if you could somehow make it to the tarmac road, buses were waiting to take people into Reno. It was like a lifeline thrown into the mud. I weighed my options quickly — stay with friends in the comfort of shared resilience, or gamble on a difficult escape through the muck.

The decision made itself. With a mixture of dread and determination, I packed what I could carry, said my farewells, and turned away from camp. The desert was still soft and treacherous underfoot, the air damp and cold. But I knew that if I didn't start moving then, I risked being trapped for days.

And so began my exodus.

I set out on foot in the chill of the morning, the playa still slick with stubborn mud that clung to my boots with every step. My first goal was modest: make it from camp to Centre Camp at six o'clock. The familiar landmarks looked strangely alien under grey skies, the vibrant chaos of the Burn now muted by drizzle and exhaustion.

It took me close to an hour to walk to center camp through the mud. It was there that I got my first stroke of luck. A pickup truck pulled up, driven by a sunburnt Aussie whose easy grin cut through the gloom. Let's call him Jack. He waved me onto the back of his truck, and I gratefully climbed aboard. With the cold wind cutting across the flat, open expanse, the ride was far from comfortable, but it was faster than trudging through miles of sludge.

As we crawled along, the scale of the exodus revealed itself. Cars were lined up in endless queues, many hopelessly stuck. Some Burners worked together, shoulders to the metal, trying to heave vehicles free. Others simply sat in

place, resigned to waiting out the weather. And then there were the ones who had ignored all warnings: sleek sports cars and tiny sedans, completely unsuited to the desert. Their wheels spun uselessly, engines revving in defiance of the mud.

I hopped down a few times to lend a hand, but the futility of it was obvious. The mud was merciless, swallowing wheels to the axle, smearing everything in its path. Jack shook his head, muttering that the desert had a way of teaching lessons the hard way.

Eventually, Jack dropped me off at the edge of the tarmac, wished me luck, and turned back toward camp. I watched his taillights fade into the mist, feeling both grateful and suddenly very alone. There were no buses waiting, no signs of the promised escape.

When Jack dropped me at the tarmac, I expected some kind of order — a line of buses, maybe a few Rangers, or at least a semblance of a system. Instead, I stepped straight into pandemonium. The road out of Black Rock was a muddy bottleneck turned free-for-all, a swarm of cars jostling for position, each driver desperate to stake their claim on the narrow strip of asphalt that led to freedom.

There was no law enforcement, no Rangers keeping watch. Officially, we were all supposed to still be at camp, waiting for the mud to dry. Out here, though, it was every Burner for themselves. RVs lumbered through deep ruts, their wheels spinning and spraying muck, while smaller cars darted in and out, angling for any gap in the flow. People on bikes wove between vehicles, their tires clogged with clay, sometimes abandoning their rides entirely and continuing on foot.

I stood on the shoulder, watching the spectacle unfold. Engines roared, tires screeched, and yet, amidst the chaos, there was also an odd camaraderie. Strangers jumped out to push stuck vehicles, drivers leaned out of windows to shout directions, and passengers handed out snacks or water to those trudging along the roadside. The playa had dissolved into a lawless exodus, and yet, somehow, it was still very much Burning Man.

For a while, I wasn't sure how I'd get out. Then, as if the desert wanted to test my luck again, a small car pulled over and a friendly voice called out: "Need a ride?"

The voice came from a little sedan that had somehow managed to stay nimble on the mud-slick road. A window rolled down and a young man with a thick Spanish accent leaned out. "Need a ride?" he asked. Relief washed over me. I nodded quickly and hopped in.

Inside, I met Miguel and Lucia, a couple from Barcelona who had just finished their very first Burn. They were wide-eyed, equal parts exhilarated and exhausted, their car still dusted in playa beige. As we inched our way toward the open highway, they spoke about how surreal the past week had been — the lights, the art, the chaos of the rainstorm, the sudden transformation of the desert into a muddy trap.

The ride itself was slow going at first. Vehicles clogged every lane, sometimes skidding sideways in the muck. We passed hulking RVs stranded axle-deep, abandoned bicycles lying like casualties along the roadside, and bewildered Burners trudging with backpacks, trying their luck on foot. Every so often, Miguel would curse under his breath as another driver tried to cut in, but Lucia would laugh it off, her good humour keeping the mood light.

Gradually, the desert began to give way to firmer ground, and the pace picked up. Conversation flowed easily. They asked about Dubai, curious about what had brought me to the desert half a world away. I, in turn, asked them what it felt like to have Burning Man as their very first taste of America. They told me it had been overwhelming, beautiful, and bizarre all at once — like stepping into another planet and then being hurled back into Earth's gravity all too quickly.

Hours later, they dropped me off at a gas station on the outskirts of Reno. We hugged like old friends, the kind of connection that only happens when strangers share a strange and intense escape. Then they drove off toward their hotel, leaving me to face the next chapter of my exodus — the mad dash to make my flight.

From the gas station, the real panic began. Ubers were unavailable, fully booked out by the flood of Burners pouring into Reno. Traditional cab companies weren't faring any better — I managed to book one through a private agency, only for it to never show. My window to make my flight was shrinking by the minute.

When a second booking finally came through and the cab arrived, I practically leapt inside. We sped toward Reno–Tahoe International, my anxiety rising

with each passing mile. I rehearsed in my mind how I'd sprint through security, imagining every possible delay as a disaster.

My fears were confirmed the moment I entered the terminal. The airport was swarming. Burners everywhere — dusty tutus, glittered boots, shaggy faux-fur coats — all queuing, all frantic, all clutching tickets for flights they feared they might miss. Security lines snaked endlessly. The energy was tense, jittery, collective desperation thick in the air.

I shuffled forward, minute by painful minute, checking the time obsessively, heart pounding as I realized I was running dangerously late. By the time I cleared security, I didn't walk — I ran. Through crowded concourses, dodging rolling suitcases, scanning frantically for my gate.

And then I saw it. My gate. Silent. Empty. Closed.

Through the glass I could see the plane, still there, mocking me from the tarmac. So close — and yet utterly out of reach. A profound wave of despair crashed over me, heavier than anything I had felt all week. For a fleeting moment, I thought I might collapse right there, kneel to the ground in frustration. But I didn't. I steadied myself, swallowed the ache of failure, and began the next battle: rerouting my way home.

Defeated but not broken, I sat at the gate and began the grim task of salvaging a way home. Reno to LA was a dead end — every flight sold out, nothing moving. My original connection from LA to Dubai was now useless. The only option left was San Francisco. After a frantic scramble online, I managed to book a flight from San Francisco to Dubai.

But first, I had to get there.

Greyhound? Sold out. Every seat booked by desperate Burners. Car-shares? Nothing available. Options dwindled fast. Finally, I turned to the only escape left: renting a car. At the Reno airport counter, I signed for a small sedan, tossed my bag in the trunk, and pointed the car west.

The drive to San Francisco was five long hours across the dark Nevada and California highways. I was bone-tired, running on fumes of adrenaline and stubbornness, but there was no choice. With each passing mile, the city lights drew closer, and with them, my lifeline back to Dubai.

When I finally pulled into San Francisco International, I dropped off the rental and walked straight into the terminal, still carrying the desert's

exhaustion and dust on my clothes. For the first time since leaving camp, I exhaled fully. I had made it.

Boarding that flight to Dubai felt less like travel and more like deliverance. My exodus was complete — but it had taken an odyssey to achieve it.

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After the chaos of 2022 and the odyssey of 2023, the following year felt almost surreal in its simplicity. In 2024, Exodus was over before it even began.

We packed up camp, braced ourselves for the long wait, and rolled out expecting hours — perhaps even a full day — of slow crawling. Instead, the line moved steadily, almost effortlessly. Within thirty minutes of leaving our camp, we had reached the tarmac road. No gridlock, no endless stop-starts, no desperate scanning of the horizon for movement. Just a smooth, unbroken flow of traffic.

It felt unreal. After everything I'd experienced, I couldn't quite believe it. The hardest part of Exodus is usually surrendering to the wait — but here, there was no wait at all. One moment we were still in Black Rock City, and the next, it was already behind us.

In that contrast lay the strange poetry of Burning Man. One year it tests every ounce of patience and resilience, another it pushes you into the chaos of survival and improvisation, and then suddenly it gifts you ease, as if to remind you that no two Burns are ever alike. Leaving can be just as much a part of the experience as arriving — whether it takes fourteen hours, an odyssey across states, or a mere half an hour.

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Looking back, each Exodus was its own rite of passage.

In 2022, after the long pandemic silence, the endless crawl to the tarmac was not a burden but a reminder of what we had regained. The waiting, the dust, the patience — all of it was part of the Burn, accepted with gratitude.

In 2023, the desert tested me differently. Exodus became an odyssey, demanding resilience, quick decisions, and trust in strangers. It was a journey not just out of Black Rock City but through frustration, despair, and finally, relief. I left that year carrying a story that felt larger than myself.

And in 2024, the desert released me lightly, almost playfully, as if to say: not every lesson needs to be hard. Sometimes the gift lies in the grace of ease.

That is the truth of Burning Man's Exodus. It is never simply about leaving the desert. It is about confronting impermanence, about recognizing that endings can be long and grueling, or sudden and kind. Each departure is a mirror: of where we are, of what we can endure, and of how we carry the dust back into the world beyond the playa.

Afterword

On Truth, Myth, and the Magic of Shared Delusion

Burning Man exists in a peculiar overlap between fiction and fact. What happens out there in the desert is both utterly real and, at times, impossible to believe. Every year, tens of thousands of people step into a place that is equal parts dream and experiment — a temporary city built on dust, delirium, and the radical idea that imagination can be a civic duty.

The stories in this collection are all true, or at least as true as memory allows in a place where time dissolves, sleep is negotiable, and reality is constantly being remixed by art, music, heat, and hallucination. Some details blur, some identities shift, some events feel like they were conjured by collective will. That's the nature of the playa. Truth here is participatory.

Burning Man thrives on that delicate equilibrium between authenticity and illusion. A prank becomes a performance. A coincidence becomes destiny. A rumor becomes ritual. The myth of *Daft Punk at the Trash Fence* endures not because it ever happened, but because we all secretly wanted it to. It's proof that belief itself can be a creative act.

In the dust, we learn that meaning is something we make together. A stranger with a meteorite can become an interstellar emissary. A woman with a rock can become a wish fulfilled. A fake cop can turn paranoia into play. The playa turns us all into storytellers — collaborators in an ongoing act of myth-making where sincerity and satire dance in the same storm.

And then, like everything built here, it vanishes. The city burns, the art burns, the stories scatter into the wind — but the feeling remains. We take it home in tiny, invisible ways: in how we look at strangers, how we laugh at chaos, how we remember that magic is not something we find but something we create.

If these tales capture even a fraction of the laughter, the absurdity, the fragile humanity beneath the goggles — then they've done their job.

About the Author

Rohan Roberts—known on the playa as *Astro*—is a long-time member of the Black Rock Observatory crew, where he organises Space Talks during the day and spends nights helping Burners peer into deep time through telescopes aimed toward planets, nebulae, and the distant shimmer of galaxies.

A writer, educator, and digital artist, he has been to eleven Burns on three continents and served as lead designer and architect of the Temple at the 2017 Netherlands Burn. His work often explores the overlap between cosmic perspective and human imagination—the same impulse that drives people to build impossible things in the desert and then let them burn.

The images in his earlier book, *Burn Brilliantly: Burning Man in Quotes*, and those shared on his Instagram @astro_ad.astra, were later shown at Volte Art Projects, a contemporary art gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The exhibition—also titled *Burn Brilliantly*—juxtaposed the awe of the cosmos with the wonder and absurd beauty of Black Rock City.

Rohan's stories and art don't try to define Burning Man or the universe; they simply hold still long enough to marvel that both exist at all.

"True stories of wonder, mischief, and revelation from Burning Man — where anything can happen and usually does."

Out in the desert, truth and myth blur into the same mirage.

At Burning Man, art cars breathe fire, temples rise and fall, and strangers become legends. In Dust and Delirium, Rohan Roberts shares twenty true tales from eleven Burns across three continents—stories of cosmic coincidence, absurd comedy, and moments of unexpected grace.

These vivid vignettes capture the humor, humanity, and transcendence of life in the dust, celebrating both the beauty of chaos and the art of collective creation. Through scenes that shift between prank and revelation, Roberts explores what draws thousands back to the desert each year: a peculiar magic that binds strangers into family and turns the impossible into a ritual of joy, loss, and transformation.

These are not stories about Burning Man so much as stories that could only exist because of it.

Rohan "Astro" Roberts is a Dubai-based educator, futurist, and long-time Burner whose work explores the overlap between cosmic perspective and human imagination.

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