

The desert landscape whipped by in a seamless blur of brown and tan, the panorama split abruptly by the horizontal scar of blue that marked the sky. The icon of fiery wrath incarnate in solar form could not bring forth any more fury than was blasted down at the bitter Mojave on this particular day in July. Carrion birds flapped lazily about, their terrible eyes cast along the dunes for any creature foolish enough to brave the rolling hills. Through this awful scene of pitiless nature was blazed a curious path, an anachronistic intrusion into the timeless desert. This asphalt interloper ran as far as the eye could see, a man-made affront to nature's killing power.

Along this desert highway ran a single automobile, a small hot-pink import. It screamed of ignorant bubbly gaiety, of mother's love and father's money. It blasted down the lonely road at unnatural speed. The sheer improbability of its presence in the wasted desert was almost comical, a clown at a funeral. Shielded within her steel cocoon, Stacy was cheerfully oblivious to the terrible boundary scant inches from the edge of the road, the human line between the civilized and the wild. She bobbed her pretty head to a candy-coated pop tune and blasted her air conditioning. The little steel bubble of cool air raced on through the uncaring desert.

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In July of 1880, six brothers from Wichita, Kansas, struck gold in the Mojave Desert. They were the surveying arm of a powerful East Coast mining company, well-funded and well-supplied. They quickly staked a claim and began to construct their mine. Within two weeks additional employees of the Suttow Mining Co. had arrived, and production began in earnest. Two months later the first outside contractors appeared on the scene. By July of 1882, a thriving mining town had risen out of the wasteland. In December of 1883 the townsfolk numbered over 10,000. With wry irony considering the total lack of a native horse population, Suttow Co. executive Jason Suttow dubbed the little city "Palomino Gulch."

This number failed, as did so many early United States census, to account for the local Indian tribe. An offshoot of the far more numerous Shoshoni Indians, the indigenous tribes of Palomino Gulch differed from their more prosperous cousins in several ways. The first was their fatalistic outlook on life. The second was their curious taboo regarding their homeland. The third was a closely guarded secret. The Palomino Gulch Indians (they had no name for themselves in their own tongue) were subjected to the same mistreatment as most other Indigenous Americans. They were displaced from their land by the Suttow Co. and its associated thugs and mercenaries; they were forced to live on the margins of the mining society. Second-class citizens by virtue of their unwillingness to integrate with an alien society, the native culture seemed doomed to wither and die. The sparse records kept by the local authorities indicate a simultaneous sharp decline in native population.

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Stacy's hot pink chariot carried her smoothly over the many miles of desert. She sang loudly along with her peppy music and tapped her manicured thumbs in time with the mindless tune pouring out from her expensive speakers. She glanced briefly at the cream-colored cowboy hat on the upholstered seat beside her, her pert nose wrinkled in a little frown. Daddy should never have sent her the horrid thing, bits of felt and braided rope made to mirror a dead profession. It made her look like a ranch girl, the kind of rough-hewn leather-clad country bumpkin that would never find a man. Her perfectly manicured nails and bleached-blond hair attested to her city-bred scorn for this desert, its dust and heat and awful brightness. Her skintight denim miniskirt chafed slightly against the fancy seating of her car.

A glance at the odometer confirmed her fears; she would be driving through this desert, doing an easy seventy, for another two hours at *least*. Monotonous sand and scrub-brush, never a variation to the road-borne eye. Stacy breathed an exasperated sigh, the cosmic conspiracy that contrived to pull her from her beloved New York apartment grated against her sense of fair play. Daddy's mad insistence that she spend the summer on his asinine ranch, where he, with all his hard-earned money, could sit around and play banjoes and ride horses with all his business friends. Grown men, playing cowboy like a bunch of little brats! She had successfully delayed until July, but he had finally threatened to cut off her allowance. That was that. Stacy was on her way to California.

She was swapping out CDs for the fifth time on this hellish trip when she first heard the noise. It was plainly audible in the absence of the insipid music. A low, harsh, metallic grinding, the sound of Adam in his fall. The chill of fear raced down Stacy's back. She eased off the accelerator and twisted down the A/C dial. The grinding persisted, increased. It gained in strength as the other sounds faded, a violent impulse feeding on their waning strength. Terrified, she applied the brake. Too little, too late. Before she had slowed to thirty, the engine gave an awful groan. Thick smoke poured from the hood. Stacy panicked as her vision was obscured and slammed the brake pedal to the floor. The car lurched madly to the side, it pitched with a shriek over the narrow railing which separated the raised highway from the endless sand.

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Palomino Gulch was quickly becoming the most prosperous boom town of the American West. The Suttow Co. brought jobs to not only adventurous miners, but to the sundry clothiers, innkeepers, boarding house owners, restaurateurs, builders, plumbers, and countless comfort women such industry demanded. Through it all the Palomino Gulch Indians remained aloof, failing even to achieve the miniscule level of integration common in the West. The gold mines appeared inexhaustible; the precious ore was shipped all over the country.

In 1885, Palomino Gulch recorded its first ever drop in population. The shift was mainly among the fringes of society, the drifters and drinkers, the prostitutes and vagrants. Over the next year, the citizens in various extraneous or supportive positions slowly bled away until those that remained were solely in the employ of the Suttow Co., roughly three hundred miners and assorted personnel. Uncounted once again were the few remaining Palomino Gulch Indians.

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Stacy regained her waking perception by slow degrees. She was first conscious of pain, pain and heat. Light slowly filtered into her shuttered eyes, like the gold in a miner's pan when the grit washes away. Awareness followed only at a wary distance, a shimmering silhouette on the desert horizon. The desert, yes, the desert and the car, the desert and the car and the grinding and the smoke and... Terror joined awareness in a mad rush to her fragile mind. Stacy snapped to lucidity with awful suddenness. She unbuckled her seatbelt in a panic, kicking open the jammed car door and stumbling out into the sand.

The car lay half-buried in a dune. The hungry desert swelled up like an angry sea to swallow the little piece of steel. A haze of thin black smoke drifted up and away from the wrecked auto. Though blind to the world, Stacy was by no means unintelligent. She quickly realized the improbability of rescuing her obliterated vehicle and took stock of her surroundings. An annihilated automobile, over a hundred miles of desert in all directions, very little to

work with. A brief check confirmed that her precious cellular phone was completely drained of power. She hadn't encountered another vehicle in over an hour, making any chance of rescue unlikely. She cautiously re-entered the vehicle and scooped up the few scattered items on the seat. The awful cowboy hat, her keys and... Stacy praised a distant God. The monogrammed canteen she had purchased at a kitschy souvenir in Tombstone, Arizona remained on the seat, covered by the horrible hat. It sloshed joyfully when she shook it. At a guess, there were twenty ounces of disgusting Arizona tap water, pale grey from the metallic sediment of the city. She placed the ugly hat atop her head and carefully adjusted it to shade her neck. Stacy looked sadly at the mangled wreck then, the canteen slung over her shoulder, set out upon the endless black road.

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In July of 1885, a Pony Express caravan arrived in Palomino Gulch to find the town deserted. The structures were largely intact, though a handful of doors had been kicked in and several mirrors smashed. The mines remained undisturbed. Nothing had been taken and the valuables of the few remaining workers were unmolested, denying that any band of brigands had assaulted the town. No corpses attested to an outbreak of disease. The three hundred remaining residents of Palomino Gulch had simply vanished. The only clues were a scattered selection of curious totems spaced widely around the town border and placed randomly in the streets. Each consisted of a wooden stake, a Native Indian doll or blanket, and the bleached skull of a horse.

As they prepared to leave the forsaken city, the postal workers were approached by a solitary Indian. This man proceeded to deliver a short treatise on the creed of the Palomino Gulch Indians before walking away, alone, into the desert. Dutifully recorded by one of the expedition members, this curious manifesto remains the only testament to the now-vanished culture of the Palomino Indians.

"Great Spirit gave our men a task. He said: "You will watch the land. You will guard the land. You will keep sacred my resting place, this is my home. You will have no name, and your name will be my name." Many seasons we kept to our work. We kept sacred this land which Great Spirit gave to us. When the Suttow men came, we gave them welcome. We told them of Great Spirit and his task. They listened well, and we were brothers. But the Suttow men lied to our men. They made filthy the bed of the Great Spirit. Our men are not men of war; this was the will of Great Spirit. We could not take arms against these pale strangers from the East and their guns and their machines, so our medicine men went to Great Spirit and asked what our men should do. He was full of a great anger because we had so failed. He gave us a last task, that with our passing we could make clean the bed of Great Spirit. And now it is done, and now we are done, and now I will go again to rest in the bed of Great Spirit."

When the Pony Express caravan returned, they reported the fate of Palomino Gulch as a native uprising. Because of the evident extinction of the culprits, no further official expedition to Palomino Gulch was ever mounted. Jason Suttow refused to allow further mining operations at the site and personally destroyed all deeds and other related papers, including the maps and charts showing the position of the mine. Jason Suttow died in 1915. The location of Palomino Gulch died with him. These facts are a matter of public record.

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Stacy's trek through the desert began poorly and quickly descended. Her designer shoes were ill-conceived for the cracked and poorly-maintained asphalt. The wrathful Sun beat down with infinite malice upon

her. In fewer than three hours she had consumed her entire water supply, she was dreadfully thirsty. Her designer denim skirt chafed against her thighs, a grinding testament to her folly. The skin quickly became red and raw. Her floral tank top provided no protection from the Sun. That perfect beach-bred tan quickly darkened into a violent burn. She had been soaked with sweat but, after the fourth hour, had ceased to perspire at all. Small crystals of salt clung to her dry clothes and scratched painfully against her skin. They glittered with the shine of subterranean crystals, miniature geological specimens wrought from flawed biology. Her expensive lipstick flaked in small chunks from her cracked lips.

After five hours of trudging along the featureless highway, Stacy was becoming delirious with thirst. The sun moved in a slow and wavering dance, it flickered and oozed about in the sky. The dry desert air shimmered and gleamed with phantasmagorical radiance. It was wholly unlike anything the girl had ever seen. She became keenly aware that she was alone in this place. The black road was the only sign of fleeting humanity. The only sounds were the steady slapping of her shoes on the asphalt and the intermittent piercing shriek of the circling buzzards overhead. Stacy had never been alone before. She surrounded herself always with the same vapid crowd of like-minded debutantes and well-endowed plaything men. To die here, alone, in this blasted wilderness... The solitude was far more frightening to her than her looming mortality.

Stacy's grim monologue was abruptly interrupted when she was sent sprawling to the ground. She had failed to perceive a sudden dip in the featureless asphalt conduit, a warp in that endless line. She sat on the road and sobbed tearlessly for a moment, picking flecks of black stone from her scraped knees and raw palms. When she began to pull herself to her unsteady feet she glanced down at her antagonist: The road sloped slightly downward, a dip which lead to a dirt path out into the desert. The ribbon of black road continued, straight and true as ever, but here there was a branch. The fog of delirium fled from Stacy's mind before the brilliant light of revelation. A road must have a purpose, a path must terminate. How many hundred miles along the highway before the city, or...? A gamble worth taking. She nearly choked on her mad laughter as she turned to totter down the dirt trail into the desert.

She walked for another hour before her efforts were rewarded. A crude shrine was planted into the desert earth, the skull of a horse atop a wooden stake. The sad remains of an Indian blanket shrouded the skull. The macabre nature of the grisly totem escaped her. It only meant people, meant life, meant *water*! The ground sloped slightly up again; she redoubled her efforts to crest the hill.

A slice of frozen time lay arrayed before her. The ghost town was preserved by the hot, dry desert air, only the now-destroyed paint gave testament to the erosion of sand and time. She staggered down the main street, passing as she did several more of the curious horse-skull artifacts. Stacy tried one building after the next, dirt and sand and broken glass were her only reward. The town had seen no human hand in over a century. Despair closed again on Stacy's heart, a grip of ice in the terrible heat. She dragged herself into the great intersection of the town's crossed streets, there at last to die, alone.

Sparkles of curious luminescence caught her slowly-closing eyes. It was a dazzling flow of light, little rainbows flitting in slow cascades. She forced her weary eyes to open, her tired mind to focus. The shimmer remained, no trick of the sun. There, in a horse's trough before the abandoned saloon, was water.

Her weak heart beat as though against the walls of a cell. She crawled on bloody palms and knees to the trough and immersed her head fully in the cool, crystal depths. Irony might have drowned her there, but she at last emerged, gasping, to breathe, and choke, and drink again. She wrestled the empty canteen from her shoulder, immersed it in the trough, laughed with manic glee at the parade of emerging bubbles as it filled. She raised it to

her lips and drank, drained it, dry, dipped it to fill again. The absolute impossibility of it all didn't even cross her fevered mind.

She drank until she felt as though she could burst. The strange notion was literal, her skirt felt tight around her hips, her dingy tank top strained against her breasts. It was only when the sensation persisted that she paused. Something felt wrong. Her shoes were binding her feet; she couldn't even feel her toes. Her fingers were going numb, too! Her shoulders ached from the constriction of her top. On the other hand, the raw burning of her knees and palms had dissipated entirely. She started to look away from the precious water before her and realized that she couldn't focus. Her eyes refused to converge on any point before her. Her entire center of vision was obscured by... By what? Something huge and golden-brown had attached itself to her face! She let out a snort of surprise and the thing on her face jumped. She inhaled sharply. A rush of curious sensation flooded her nose. She smelled the fresh null-smell of the water, the dry stony heat of the sand. She smelled the flat, pallid ghost of the desiccated wooden city, the barely-present aroma of old leather. There was something else, too – an unaccountable musk at once alien and familiar.

She caught a glimpse of her hands, the canteen clutched between her fingers. They were thickening, darkening, losing all sensation as they changed. Realization settled on her like fire from Heaven. She let out a loud whinny of surprise, choked on the alien noise from her throat. The sun beat upon her neck as her lengthening ears thrust away her hat, her tank top frayed and split as her shoulders bulked up with muscle. Her body throbbed as it expanded, lengthening and broadening into a round barrel shape. She frantically kicked off her skirt lest it pinch her expanding posterior in half. Her silk panties snapped off and fell onto the sand as an itchy spot formed at the base of her spine. The itch intensified to a painful pinch before exploding into a cascade of golden hair. Stacy's new tail thrashed back and forth in agitation. Through it all a low, slow, dull, thumping sound resonated in the changing girl's head. It took her several puzzled seconds to realize that she was hearing her own pulse, the slow, powerful bass of a horse's mighty heart.

Through it all, despite the absurd reality of her equine metamorphosis, Stacy's focus remained mainly on the canteen. Fingers fused and hardened until her knobby hoof-hands could barely hold the slippery object, but she persevered. Her lips became rubbery and elongated, they reached out to grip the nozzle even as her face lengthened and her jaw reformed. They wrapped greedily around the canteen, dexterous and sensitive. The hundreds of tiny hairs of her new snout transmitted unaccountable feelings to her fogged mind. The cool water she poured past her enlarging teeth was taking longer to reach her stomach as her neck stretched out into a graceful curve. Tears rolled out of her dark eyes as the changes accelerated but, even as she wept for lost humanity, she rejoiced in the glorious wealth of moisture.

She felt, rather than saw, the warping of her hindquarters and legs. Her rump expanded and pulled at her spine, it forced her thighs downward. The undulating curvature of her elongated spine pushed her rear high into the air, her moist womanhood exposed shamelessly to the world. Her calves shrunk and popped as her knees assumed a new configuration, a platform of stability for her massive new form. The sad shreds of her fancy shoes lay in tatters around her large hooves. All the while, her generous breasts had been creeping slowly down her chest. They mashed uncomfortably against the trough before, slowly shrinking, they reached their new position above her crotch. Smooth golden hair washed in waves over Stacy's entire body. It felt oddly cool in the desert sun.

At last she could no longer clutch the monogrammed canteen between her front legs. It fell with a hollow thump to the saloon deck. With the last of her fading humanity, Stacy noted with satisfaction that she had drained it dry. She unsteadily pulled herself to her hooves. Her shredded clothes blew about sluggishly in the wind. A stray

gust caught her clasp-purse and scattered her various plastic slivers out into the sand. Once caught briefly in the cracked wood of the trough before blowing away forever, a driver's license belonging to one Stacy Suttow.

In the abandoned streets of Palomino Gulch, a beautiful young mare clopped awkwardly about the dirt road. She stooped to drink briefly from the trough near the ancient saloon, then, with sure-footed confidence, galloped off into the desert. The scent of other horses reached her on the desert breeze.

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Public record fails to provide a reason why the Suttow Company never resumed mining operations at Palomino Gulch. Neither is there any indication as to why Jason Suttow never sold the land, but destroyed the deeds and prohibited further development of the property. Nor can present-day naturalists account for the thriving population of wild horses overlooked by the residents of Palomino Gulch.