

D.C. had spent the past six hours rattling through the desert in a bus that smelled like burnt coffee and old vinyl. The road stretched ahead in endless waves of heat shimmer, and the only interruptions were the occasional pothole that jolted everyone in their seats. They glanced at their screen, fingers tapping out the final lines of an article—something about urban legends, before setting it aside. Outside, the landscape blurred, a reminder that they were heading straight into the unknown. The hum of the engine and the muffled sounds of conversation formed a comforting background noise.

D.C. is an enigmatic figure immersed in the digital universe. They had been living in Los Angeles trying to pursue their dreams of being a writer. The bus felt roomier than the extra small apartment they had been accustomed to for the last six months. The rent was one of the driving forces that helped D.C. plunge into a new venture. Despite being small, the apartment was right next to downtown L.A. in a particularly run down area and still somehow cost \$1500 per month. So with the lease being up, they decided to pack up what little belonging they had and head off to a new adventure.

It was the last day of October. Their destination? Tucson, Arizona. The bus schedule had a transfer in Phoenix for an hour, but for \$45 from L.A. to Tucson, it was worth the price, and their destination was just slightly over two hours away at this point. Tucson was a place they had never been, a place fraught with eerie rumors and unsettling tales. It was the sort of place that could fuel an entire series of bestsellers if they played their cards right. But even with the promise of potential success, D.C. couldn't shake off a sense of foreboding. They were alone, resources dwindling, and heading straight towards the unknown. The irony of the situation, given it was Halloween, wasn't lost on them.

D.C. glanced up as the bus rumbled back onto the highway, somewhere between Phoenix and Tucson. The stop had thinned the crowd; some passengers had disembarked, while others, fresh-faced and carrying travel pillows, had boarded. Their eyes snagged on a small figure across the aisle. A little girl, maybe seven or eight, sat alone, a stark contrast to the worn interior of the bus and the general air of travel-weariness. She was dressed to the nines in what looked like her Sunday best – a frilly pink and white dress, complete with matching socks and shiny black patent leather shoes. It struck D.C. as a bit odd, the formality of her attire so out of sync with the atmosphere of the bus ride. D.C. didn't give it much thought beyond that, though. Just a kid, probably headed to visit family, they figured.

Yet feeling a strange connection, D.C. leaned towards her, the words leaving their lips almost involuntarily, "There are a lot of weird people out there, be careful."

The little girl's reaction was far from what they expected. She turned her head—slowly, deliberately. Her large, glassy eyes locked onto D.C.'s, and for a moment, the world outside the bus seemed to fade into the background hum of the engine. Then in a voice that sent shivers down their spine—a voice far too deep for her age and gender—she replied, "You have no idea."

D.C. felt their stomach drop. Every instinct screamed at them to look away, but they were rooted in place. Then—just as suddenly—she turned forward again, as if the conversation had never happened. A moment of silence enveloped D.C. as they pulled back, their face a mixture of surprise and confusion. Their expression said, "What the hell?" without a single word being uttered. D.C. released a breath they didn't realize they were holding. Their hands were cold. It was probably nothing. Probably.

As the bus continued its journey, the morning sun beamed down onto the highway, its rays bouncing off the asphalt and casting an almost dreamlike haze over the entire scene. The roar of the engine and the vast expanse of open road ahead symbolized not just physical distance, but the unpredictable journey that D.C. had chosen to embark upon.

The bus wheezed to a halt at the terminal, disgorging passengers into the busy heart of the city. D.C. donned their fedora and disembarked. It was late October but the desert air was warm and inviting. Their gaze drifted around the terminal before walking towards the back of the bus to retrieve their suitcase. A man, indistinguishable from the average city-dweller but for his uncanny resemblance to someone D.C. would meet later, handed them a suitcase with a jovial "Here you go, have a great day!" D.C. barely acknowledged the man with a distracted "Yeah, thanks," before they trudged away, suitcase in tow.

The city streets beckoned, a sea of faces and colors passing by. D.C. took note of a newspaper stand where a woman was making her daily stop. She was intriguing. Her attire was reminiscent of characters from a 1920s detective movie—a classic black and white suit that was effortlessly stylish. She projected a blend of the charisma of Will Smith and the stoic charm of Tommy Lee Jones, a magnetic combination.

As she grabbed her newspaper from the stand, the man behind the counter quipped, “Hey, Detective Mitchell. Did you hear the bog monsters are up to their antics again?” His nonchalance was surprising. Detective Mitchell’s indifferent response was equally curious. “Yeah yeah, the police are looking into it.”

D.C. overheard this exchange, a bemused expression on their face as they pondered the strange casualness with which the subject of ‘bog monsters’ was addressed. Dismissing it as a possible local joke or band name. Checking their watch they resumed their walk. They had researched motels on the bus and found the closest within walking distance of the terminal that they could afford.

Their journey took them to a nondescript motel, the flickering neon sign its only distinguishing feature. As they walked into the office to rent a room, they were startled by a familiar face behind the counter. It was the man from the bus terminal—or was it the newsstand guy? It was uncanny. D.C. voiced suspicion, “I’m sorry, but weren’t you just selling newspapers at the newsstand down the road?” D.C. asked, their brow furrowed in confusion.

The man behind the counter blinked, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face. “Nope. Been here all day. Checking folks in and out.”

D.C. hesitated, feeling a wave of disorientation. “I… I could have sworn…” they stammered, trying to reconcile the identical faces. “Do you have a twin brother?”

The man chuckled, a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nah, no twin. But folks do say I got doppelganger. Apparently, there’s another fella in town looks just like me. Never met him, though.”

D.C. stared, a mix of bewilderment and disbelief swirling within them. “That’s… that’s incredible,” they managed to say, still trying to process the information. “Two people, exactly alike, and you’ve never seen them.”

The man shrugged, seemingly unfazed by the peculiarity of the situation. “Probably happens more often than you’d think, why I bet there’s someone that looks like you running around too.” he said, grabbing a key card from a rack behind him. “So, you want a room?”

D.C. nodded their head, pushing aside the perplexing encounter for the moment. “Yes, please,” they said, pulling a credit card out of their wallet. “One week.”

The man processed the transaction and slid the key card across the counter. “Room 117,” he said, “Enjoy your stay.”

D.C. took the key card, their mind still buzzing with the strangeness of the encounter. They couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right, but they pushed the thought aside, eager to get settled and start their new life in Tucson. As they turned to leave, they couldn’t help but glance back at the man behind the counter, his face a mirror image of the one they had seen just hours before. The unsettling feeling lingered, a subtle hint of the oddities that awaited them in this peculiar city.

As D.C. was leaving, the manager’s question caught them off guard, “Are you going to 4th Ave tonight for the Halloween festivities?”

Caught in the wave of the town’s eccentricities, D.C. responded with a resigned laugh. “Yeah, why not. I’m new in town, maybe I’ll meet some people. Thanks for the tip.”

Their first day in Tucson was shaping up to be more peculiar than they had imagined, and they had a feeling that the peculiarities were just beginning.

The exterior of the motel was bland under the harsh sunlight, its facade mirroring the other nondescript beige buildings that dotted the landscape at the city’s edge. As D.C. approached their room, a familiar sight caught their eye. The little girl from the bus was stepping into another motel room, alone. It was a sight that made D.C. pause, a frown lining their features momentarily before they unlocked the door to

117 and stepped inside.

The room was a standard motel set-up, designed for those planning extended stays. It housed a bed, a small table with chairs, a dresser with a TV on top, and a compact kitchenette. Still unbelievably larger than what they had left behind in L.A.. D.C. set down their suitcase on the bed and took a moment to survey the room. Their gaze landed on a peculiar painting of a person whose eyes seemed to follow them around the room. D.C. stepped left, then right, watching with amusement as the painted eyes seemed to track their movements. “Creepy,” they muttered under their breath, shaking their head. “I need to get out.”

They glanced in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door before heading out. The look was their signature—something between professional and influencer. The gray vest over a crisp white button-up (sleeves rolled just enough to show the ink curling up their forearm) paired well with black dress pants. Put-together, but still comfortable enough to wander in. The typewriter tattoo stood out beneath the rolled cuff, its paper scroll twisting up their skin, the inked words forever pressed into them: Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.

They gave a final nod to their reflection and headed out.

D.C. meandered through downtown Tucson, noting how incredibly different this downtown was. It was clean and vibrant. And the people were pleasant. Typically in L.A. they had felt apprehension just walking to the bus stop to go anywhere. But Tucson felt different. Better. D.C. found a quaint corner coffee shop with an outdoor seating area. They chose a spot outside so they could take in the city, large coffee in hand, and their laptop sat open in front of them, the screen filled with the beginnings of their narrative. The two story building across the street looked like a relic from another time. It even seemed drained of color. The first floor housed a general store with oak-paneled windows, a sign painted in looping cursive, and an old-fashioned cash register visible through the glass and the second floor looked like office space.

Then the couple walked by.

D.C. blinked. Their faded jeans and graphic tees blurred at the edges, dissolving into pinstriped suits and flapper dresses. Even their posture changed—backs straighter, movements sharper. And the colors...bled away. Their skin and clothes faded into a stark palette of black, white, and gray. A crisp voice floated across the street, carrying the sharp edges of a 1920s Trans-Atlantic accent: ‘Say, what’s the big idea?’

D.C. whipped their head around, scanning for any reaction from the pedestrians. Nothing. The moment the couple stepped past the store, their colors snapped back in place—the flapper dress vanishing, the modern world resuming like nothing had happened.

D.C. gripped their coffee cup. The heat against their palms was the only thing keeping them tethered to reality. They swallowed hard. Tucson was going to be a lot weirder than expected.

The coffee shop waitress, Maureen, appeared at their table just as they were about to question their sanity.

She broke their puzzlement. “Can I get you another coffee?”

D.C. pointed out the peculiar transformation, but to their surprise, Maureen was entirely nonplussed. She shrugged it off, saying, “Yeah, that place is weird.”

The casual dismissal of something so bizarre left D.C. dumbfounded. “But... it’s black and white, and those people’s clothes transformed... Nothing?! Really?! You’re not fazed by that?”

Maureen simply shrugged again. “It’s like seeing the Grand Canyon, if it’s your first time it’s amazing but if you’ve seen it before, it’s just a big canyon,” she said as she started moving to the next table. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Reeling from the constant stream of peculiarities, D.C. could only sit in shock. It was as if they had stepped into an alternate reality where strange occurrences were as mundane as the morning newspaper. But one thought buoyed their spirits.

“I’m definitely getting a book deal out of this place,” they muttered to themselves, looking at the half-

empty cup of coffee. “But I need somewhere normal to write... and not so many stimulants.” Their gaze drifted back to the monochrome store across the street, the gears in their mind already churning with the makings of a story like no other.