

I just need to find some water. That was my thought as I stumbled through the desert under the half moon. I don't know how long it had been since I had a drink. It was night, so the air was cool, but it was still so dry. I hadn't spoken out loud in at least a few hours, and I don't know if I even could, given the state I'm in. Not that there was anyone to call out to. An endless ocean of sand was all I could see in any direction. At least the celestial bodies in the sky provided some illumination. I kept walking. *What is going on?*

Earlier That Day

It had been another long day of driving. I had finally hit Nevada though. Only a few hundred miles to go and I would be at Burning Man. I've been to a handful of similar events over the last couple years, but now I was finally going to the big one. There wasn't anything near that scale in Vermont. I couldn't wait to get away from the constant grind of everyday life and just spend a few days with like minded people in a temporary sanctuary from mass consumerism. I gently accelerated to a few miles per hour over the speed limit and turned the radio up.

I was a few hours behind schedule, but I was still on track to get to the site before midnight. I wanted to arrive before dark, but a few missed exits ensured that wouldn't happen. *I wish that Jeremy had been able to make it.* He was the only one of my friends that was able to get the time off, but a family emergency had forced him to cancel at the last minute. I didn't mind driving alone, but it would have been nice to have someone on navigation.

I drove on for several more hours. *I've got to be getting close.* Of course, the highway was under construction, so I was forced to take a detour. I looked at the GPS on my phone again. *Good, only about 15 miles to go.* I was surprised by the lack of cars on the road. Given the size of Burning Man, I figured traffic would be much heavier. *Ah well, most people probably don't come on the first day. Or maybe they knew about the construction and went a different route. I probably should have thought of that.* I continued driving. The road had changed to gravel a couple miles back. My surroundings were eerily quiet. I figured there would be at least some noise from the wildlife this far out into the desert. The silence was a bit unnerving.

Wait a minute, when did I turn my radio off? I swear I had just been listening to music. I probably got out of range of the station I was listening to, but shouldn't it have gone to static? *That's odd. I must have been spacing out.* There wasn't much variety in the landscape, so my mind probably just went on autopilot. I looked at my GPS again. Only about 5 miles left. *When's the last time I saw a car? I'm only a few miles away; there should be at least some traffic.* I glanced down again. *Did the address on my GPS get...* Out of the corner of my eye I saw something appear in front of my car. I slammed on the brakes and slid off the road. *What was that?!* I got out of my car and looked around. *I didn't almost hit someone, did I?* "Hello?" I called out into the desert. No response. *It must have been some animal.*

I got back into my car and started to reverse back onto the road. My front tires spun in place. *Am I stuck? The sand didn't seem that deep.* I got back out. Sure enough, there was a drop off in the sand about 5 feet from the road. Just close enough for my front tires to get stuck.

Are you serious? Why aren't there guardrails if the sand gets that deep? I sighed in frustration. At least I was only a few miles away from the site. I'm sure they've got a help line I can call and they can send someone to pull me out.

I take my phone out of the car. No cell or internet signal. *What? I was just following my GPS. How can I not have a signal?* I opened my GPS again. There's no current trip, and the address isn't in my history. *What's going on with my phone? It must be acting up after having been on all day. I'll try restarting it.* I hold the power button down to shut it off. Once the screen goes blank, I hold the power button to turn it back on. Nothing. *What is wrong with this thing? I've had it plugged in all day.*

"Well, that's great", I grumbled to the ether. *What do I do now?* I know that when you get stranded you're supposed to stay in one place and wait for help. At the same time, I know that I could probably walk the rest of the way to Burning Man in about 45 minutes. I think about my two options. After a few moments, my impatience wins. *It's not too long of a walk. I'll walk there, then find someone with a truck to pull me out. I wore my hiking boots, so it shouldn't be too bad.*

I grab a water bottle from my trunk and start to make my way to Burning Man. *I know that it's along this road, so I'll follow along and keep my eyes open. I'm assuming it will be hard to miss.* I walk for about 20 minutes. The air has cooled to a slightly more comfortable 80°. *At least I'm not doing this during the day.* I take a drink. *Though maybe during the day there would actually be cars on this road that I could flag down.* I still thought it was odd that I hadn't seen a single car in over an hour.

Another 10 minutes passes. I look out into the horizon. *The desert is beautiful. I can see why they have the festival out here.* I look forward again. *I should see the grounds any minute now.* I freeze. *Where is the road?* I quickly spin around. Nothing but sand and shrubbery. My stomach drops. *What is happening!? I've been walking along the road this whole time.* My heart is racing. It feels like the universe is playing a cruel joke.

I force myself to take a breath and take a drink. *I must have not noticed a turn in the road. I'll retrace my steps and find it again.* I turn around. At least the moon is full. And with the lack of light pollution, the sky is filled with stars. *I'll walk back the way I came. I should find the road in a couple minutes.* I make sure to focus on the ground in front of me. I will not miss the road when it comes back into view.

I walk onwards for about five minutes. Or has it been 10? I still don't see the road. I take another drink. *Am I just going in circles? All the scenery looks the same.* I try to remember what I learned about astronomy when I was in school. I try to find the Big Dipper. I know that it points to the North Star. *If I can find that, then I can figure out which way west is. That should eventually take me to the festival.* I've given up on finding my car at this point. I scan the cosmos above me. I see a constellation that looks somewhat familiar. *Got it! That has to be it.* I pause for a moment. *Is the handle supposed to be straight?* I curse myself for not paying more

attention in school. Still, that must be it. I draw a line to the North Star. I turn 90° left, take a drink, and start walking.

I keep walking for... 20 minutes? Maybe 30? My legs were starting to get tired, and the air was starting to feel drier. I open my water bottle. Empty. *Why didn't I just stay in my car? At least the temperature has gotten a bit cooler.* It felt like it was about 70° now. The desert around me is silent. All I can hear is my own footsteps. I sit down. *I'll just take a couple minutes to rest my legs.*

I look at a nearby shrub. Is there any moisture I could get? I touch the shrub. It's bone dry. After a minute or two... or was it five? In any case, I get up again. My legs feel stiff, and my throat is dry. I wish I had brought a water bottle with me. *Wait... didn't I have a water bottle? I swear I grabbed one out of my car. Didn't I?* I look around my immediate area. *I guess I didn't.* I look back up at the sky. *There's the North Star. I guess I'll just keep following it. I don't have any other ideas.* I take a couple steps and trip on a root. I'm stunned for a moment, then get back up. *At least the sand cushioned my fall.* I dust myself off. *I need to watch where I'm going. The moon is almost full, but it's still not that easy to see my surroundings.*

Another hour or two passes. *I'm so thirsty. I know it's a desert, but shouldn't there be traces of water somewhere?* I take another step forward. The sand feels coarse on my feet. *I don't know how much longer I can keep this up.* I shiver. *Has it always been this chilly? I should have brought a jacket. A t-shirt isn't going to do much good.* I suddenly feel a sense of unease. Like someone is... watching me? I stop moving and look around. There's nothing but sand. I look up at the half moon. A few stars dot the sky around it. *I just need to keep following the moon. That will get me to my destination.*

Wait, where was I going again? I know that I was walking in this desert. But I was going someplace, wasn't I? I could have sworn that there was a reason I was here. I try to remember. *Yes, I was definitely going somewhere. I was following the moon to lead me to...* My mind draws a blank. Why can't I remember? I try to think back to how I got here in the first place. Nothing comes to mind. *Oh well, I'm sure if I keep walking I'll remember.*

My eyes dart open. Was I asleep? I feel the sand on my back. I sit up slowly and look around. There's still nothing but sand. The crescent moon barely provides enough light for me to see. I stand up, but almost collapse. My legs feel like they're on fire. *I just need to keep moving.* I force myself to take a step, and then another. My breath fogs the air in front of me. The sand is like glass beneath my feet. But I have to press on.

Another... some amount of time passes. I can no longer swallow. It hurts to keep my eyes open. But I keep walking. The sound of my footsteps is the only thing keeping the deafening silence at bay. *Just keep walking. You just need to keep walking.* Why am I walking again? *I just need to keep walking.*

I'm still walking. I can barely muster up the energy to glance at the complete blackness that spans across the sky. I close my eyes. Keeping them open is too painful. I need to just focus on walking. I take another step... then another.....then another.....then another.....then..... another.....