

No one came into the gas station in the middle of the night, but eighteen year old Ramona Shaw liked that part of the job. That was the only thing that made her job at gas station between here in Goldfields, California and Pahrump, Nevada worthwhile. Her boss always said he could charge whatever he wanted or they could drive 30+ miles in any direction to the next station. Yet customers always picked a bone with her, drove her up the wall.

The harsh florescent lights around the gas station left a soft glow against the pitch black desert. It was mostly the sign with the gas prices, double what Ramona could find in town. She was out in the middle of nowhere, Goldfields proper was 15 miles away. But Ramona wasn't entirely alone, she had her trusty radio show for company. She kept busy restocking the shelves and wiping down the counters before the real midnight lull, before the radio show started.

*Desert Dwellers* is an amateur radio show that runs from 11pm to 2am, by a guy who called himself Dante, out of Roswell, New Mexico. Ramona found the show by accident years ago. She thought Dante just used it as a kitschy deal to get people to come to the lame Roswell alien museum, which Ramona had been to with Abigail during spring break their freshman year of high school. Every episode is a topic, and Dante actually listens and helps callers figure out the truth of what they're seeing (if there is one), interviews knowledgeable people with credentials on the topic at hand. Now *Desert Dwellers* was the only good thing Ramona had left in her life. The gas station didn't count.

Ramona and Abigail were supposed to apply for the same college, but Ramona couldn't see herself continuing in school, and she backed out of their agreement. Maybe it was just a cop out, ignoring the truth that this town was dying. For better or worse, she let Abigail go. But once Abigail left for college, the train depot stop shut down two months later, 90% of Goldfields lost their jobs, the town being owned the railroad. Ramona's dad was a train engineer, and she knew she was on borrowed time now. Goldfields did actually still have gold to mine, but gold prices had been so low for over ten years that the mines were long closed. This place, like a lot of places in the middle of nowhere, wasn't worth sticking around. Being a gas station cashier wasn't going to cut it for much longer.

For now, she didn't have to think about that, there was four hours of considering a different truth, within a different realm of possibility. The familiar, eerie intro song played through the store on Ramona's trusted radio. She dropped her rag and spray bottle with cleaner and darted to her little black one with a handle next to the register. It was her mom's handheld radio, but as soon as she found *Desert Dwellers*, Ramona kept it for herself. She never bothered changing the station to anything again, even if the rest of the shows on this station were crazy political talk. Ramona was worried that this lifeline would be lost forever if she changed the station. She found it by accident, and it can be taken away by accident, too.

*Welcome to Desert Dwellers, folks.* Dante's familiar voice put Ramona at ease, like hearing an old friend. Her heart panged as she instinctively still looked for Abigail in the empty convenience store. Every night, Ramona hoped that Abigail was still listening. She sighed, still alone. *Desert*

*Dwellers* was their thing, she never had it without Abigail until four months ago. Facing that truth was also on the backburner until after the show.

*Welcome to Desert Dwellers, folks. I'm your host, Dante, coming through your speakers. I've got a great show for you.*

The doorbell rang as a guy walked in. He was a big guy, stretching his legs as he walked through the store. Ramona kept an eye on him, but turned up the radio. The man went straight for the hot dog warmer. Long haul truckers always had funky meals that they scraped together from whatever the gas station had. Ramona's gas station wasn't one of those nice ones with a fast food joint attached, either. After a few minutes, the man brought up a smorgasbord of food and energy drinks to the counter. Ramona didn't question it, just rung it up.

"Your gas prices are a ripoff," the man scoffed. He watched Ramona like she was going to profusely apologize and give him something on the house, maybe bat her eyes at him? She wasn't sure, and definitely didn't want to know. Ramona scoffed and rolled her eyes. People always want something for nothing.

*Alright, the lines are open now. If you have or still do work for Area 51, please call in. We want to hear from you. Have you seen alien beings at Area 51? Tell me your stories.*

Ugh, of course she had an obnoxious customer just as the show was getting good. "I don't set the prices," she said on autopilot for the umpteenth time that month. She bagged up the items and recited the total.

"Do you want gas, too?" She tried to say it in a polite voice, but it was a struggle for it not to come out dripping with sarcasm. Ramona really just wanted him gone so she could listen to her show, the only thing that made the first half of her shift bearable. "It's 27 miles east, or 15 miles west to the next gas station, depending on which way you're going." A strained smile plastered on, but she banged her toes against the floor. Get. Out. Of. My. Store.

The man grumbled. "Fine." She added gas to his total and he paid. The doorbell rang as he left. Ramona leaned back against her chair. A headache pounded its way to her skull. She was going to need a cigarette soon.

*Yeah, hi, Dante. Am I on the air?*

*Yes, what's your name?*

*Brandon.*

*Hi Brandon. Do you work at Area 51?*

*No, but my girlfriend did, she's an army medic. Recently got laid off, I think it's suspicious. She's asleep right now, but she told me a story once, where she saw an experiment...*

Of all the spooky mysteries, and there was a lot, Ramona liked Area 51 the best. Shadow people, ghosts, prophecies, Ramona didn't believe in that stuff. But potential government, genetic experiments? It at least seemed likely, governments do all sorts of strange tests to humans in the name of "national security."

During a three day weekend, Ramona and Abigail tried to go to Groom Lake, the salt plain that was the major physical landmark of Area 51. They took Ramona's ten year old beat up car that sputtered to life, and its brakes squealed. They drove up with jugs of water, oil canister, and a spare tire, but not much else.

It was three hours away from home, through the nothingness of the desert, just the sand, rocks and the one lane highway with the sun bearing down. When they were at least an hour away from Groom Lake, fencing started up and never stopped. Ramona's heart pulsed with excitement and nerves when she noticed the gates were electrified, and government warning signs of federal trespassing. Abigail never asked to go back in the face of possible danger.. The gates seemed like they lasted forever until they were stopped by gates and the military.

"Quick, switch spots," Abigail said as she unbuckled her seatbelt. Ramona followed, and they switched spots.

The scary looking military guards with guns did not believe Abigail's lie about getting turned around. Ramona remembered Abigail had this stupid smile plastered on her face when she said it. The guards watched them like the stupid teenagers they were, like they were put up to it, or just bored out of their mind. It was the moment she knew Abigail was perfect for her because Abigail didn't dismiss her as crazy ramblings, like her family did. Abigail embraced the adventure of curiosity with her.

"Fuck!" Ramona hung her head and slammed her fist against the counter. The feeling of the sun on her arms disappeared for the void of the gas station. But her heart continued to ache as regret set in.

She let her conspiracy hunting partner go. All because she didn't want to move to the city, because she was scared of jumping in head first. Now Abigail was going to go onto other adventures, and Ramona would be stuck here, living for her radio show and dealing with disgruntled truckers and helping lost tourists find their way to Reno or Vegas. While everyone else in Goldfields got out of dodge. It was sad seeing middle aged or older people working service positions, like you know they should be doing something better than working fast food or at a donut shop. Ramona was on that road now if something didn't change.

When did she stop living for adventures in uncovering the truth? Ramona knew the answer deep in her gut. When she accepted that this job, this joke of a life, when she stopped accepting it as just a pitstop in time. Overnight hours cut into daytime hours of discovery.

Just thinking about Abigail and life made her headache turn into a full blown throbbing. That's it, Ramona reached her cap. She dug through her purse for her cigarettes and lighter, and grabbed the radio. The cool desert air hit her face as the doorbell rang. It felt like a dose of reality. The little convenience store drove her crazy sometimes, it was too easy to think in the silence.

*Thanks for calling, Brandon.* Dante said. She turned it up just before she put the radio on the ledge of the window.

*Thanks, Dante.* Brandon hung up.

Ramona lit her cigarette, leaned against the wall. She looked out beyond the lights above the gas pumps, the sign, there was nothing. Just blackness. At least the desert will keep her mistake, eventually the sand could cover the feeling of regret.

*We're talking about Area 51. Have you been there? Call me at (800) 555-5555. Caller, you're on the air.*

*Hi, Dante. Huge fan.* Ramona jumped at the sound of the voice, her cigarette nearly falling out of her fingers. She cursed as she maneuvered her fingers, narrowly avoiding the lit ash.

*What's your name?*

"Abigail..." Ramona whispered. Her eyes welled up into pools of tears as she heard Abigail talk to Dante. Once upon a time, they used to talk about calling Dante about what they saw at Area 51, but he never did an Area 51 episode while they were together.

*Hi Abigail. What's your story?*

*Umm, well my ex girlfriend and I tried to go as far as we could, maybe catch something in the periphery. We told the MPs we were trying to see Groom Lake, but they totally didn't believe us.* Abigail chuckled, like she remembers it fondly, too. Ramona thought her heart was going to be ripped out from her.

*Actually, she's the one who got me into your show, and I'm pretty sure she's listening right now.*

Was Abigail trying to send her a message?

*Do you want to say hi?*

It was quiet for a moment. Ramona took a drag of her cigarette, but she couldn't stand up straight, so she crouched down to get closer to the radio.

*Hi, Ramona.*

Does she sound strained, or cautiously optimistic? It was hard to tell, too easy to see it in Ramona's favor. Her stomach turned, but she sucked down her cigarette faster

Ramona nodded her head, even though Abigail couldn't see her.

*What's your story, Abigail?*

Abigail told the story she remembered, condensed for the public. The drive, the electrified gates, the scary MPs. Ramona could hear it in Abigail's voice, she remembered it fondly too. Ramona could see her smiling.

*The MPs were aggressive but polite, so I made a three point turn to get out of the gated area and head back home. I don't know if Ramona saw it, but I did. I saw something by the front gate, something unusual.* Her voice shook, like she was going to cry.

*What'd you see?* Dante asked.

He was clearly on the edge of his seat. So was Ramona, as she put out her cigarette. She didn't remember anything from that moment that was weird. She was too busy staring at Abigail, gooey in love feelings clouded her mind. But Abigail was looking away, so what was she staring at?

*I saw--* then the signal dropped. *Desert Dwellers* went radio silent. The station emitted static for a moment before it went to the backup music.