

Kuru

That morning, we rattled west down Highway 60 in my old work truck. It was a tough old thing, only started when it wanted, and like every other morning, I had to stick the hose in the engine to cool it off before we went anywhere. I didn't have time to change the oil before we left and as it neared 300,000, I worried that every mile might be its last.

But the truck didn't scare me as much as Annie did. She was shaking all over and scratching her arm something awful. I noticed a thin trickle of blood there. It was smeared everywhere: her arm, her hands, her fingernails, her t-shirt. Whenever I tried to stop her, she pushed me away.

"Gotta stop for gas," I said. "We can go in, get a snack. Sound good?"

She didn't say anything.

"Annie? You okay?" I turned to look at her for a second, put my hand on her shoulder. The light from the tinted window made her look even paler, smaller, greyer than she really was. She was so much different than the way I remembered her: laughing, making dirty jokes, punching me in the arm when I said something stupid. "Annie?"

"Jesus, Pete, will you shut up?" she said. "Just watch the road. And turn off that Steve Earle. It's making me sick." And she covered herself with her fuzzy blue blanket until only her graying hair poked out.

I really couldn't believe this was Annie. It had only been a few years since her high school graduation. She'd been so happy, so hopeful. We'd all had so much resting on her veterinary degree. The ranch would finally be in the black.

But there she was, curled in the passenger side of my work truck rocking with the engine. It was hard to tell how much of it was her shaking and how much was the truck. When we passed

the sign for Datil: population 54, I pulled over at Bill's. This was the only shabby gas station for miles around: a log cabin with two ancient pumps. I opened Annie's door and she blinked in the sunlight.

"Hey, put some Chapstick," I told her, looking at her cracking lips. They weren't bleeding anymore but they were so delicate and colorless that they looked like a long ash at the end of a cigarette. Last night, Mom used clippings from her aloe vera to stop the swelling.

I pulled my tin of strawberry Rosebud out of my pocket and handed it to her. The other guys make fun of me for it, especially for it being strawberry, but it keeps my wife happy and that's all I care about. Annie didn't look at me but she took the tin. "Sit here as long as you want, okay? I'll pick you out something."

"I can pick for myself."

"Just remember what Pop said. Pringles aren't a food group," I teased. If there's one thing that girl still loves, it's Pringles. I never enjoyed the taste of pressed potato flakes, but she sure does.

"Shut up, asshole." She smiled like I hadn't seen her smile in years and pushed her hair back off her face.

"You first, foot face," I unhooked the truck's key from my keyring and handed it to her before walking inside.

On the phone, the guy from the Center told us to treat her like we still trusted her. Even if they were just little things, he said, she had to feel like she was part of the family. I don't blame him for making it sound like we didn't trust her. We didn't. She'd stole tons of money from us over the years, money we needed to fix the roofs, feed the horses, and buy new tractors. We'd made do, hiring one less guy, the tractors had made it another year. The only thing still killing us

were the vet bills for the horses. With Annie back in the saddle at home, we'd be all right. Forgiving her wasn't going to be easy. But we were trying.

Anyways, I grabbed a Coke and some Pringles and walked to the counter where an old man was at the register. He was withered, had some yellow-grey hair, reading glasses. He was reading a newspaper, but his hands were shaking it around so bad I couldn't understand how he was able to read it at all. The store wasn't very clean but I could understand that. Didn't look like he had any help around there. Everything had dust on it, and some of the designs on the bags of chips were ones I recognized from when I was a kid. There was a news board with one flyer, yellow from being in the sun so long and it read, "Pastor Bill's Congregation invites YOU to the Feast of the Lord! Sunday evenings, 6-10 PM. Bring your friends AND your sins! And every FIRST SUNDAY OF THE MONTH, bring a potluck dish, too!"

I figured Bill on the sign and Bill on the flyer would mean Bill behind the counter. "Morning, sir. You Bill?"

"Sure am, son," he said, folding the newspaper with corners poking out everywhere. "What'll it be?" He was chewing gum and his jaw looked rickety, like it might fall off. And he was still shaking. Granddad had Parkinson's and I figured old Bill must've had it. Almost looked like Annie had it too, the way she was shaking. But with her, I knew better.

"This pop and twenty on number one, please," I said. "And you wouldn't happen to know how to get over to the rehab center? State runs it. I think we're close but I'm not too sure."

"Oh, son. I didn't take you for one of *them*," he said, and looked at the fifty I handed him over his reading glasses. "This money clean?"

"I earned that money, sir. I'm taking my little sister," I pointed out the window. With one hand on the door handle and the other at her gut, Annie heaved and heaved and heaved, puking

all over the side of my truck. I wasn't looking forward to cleaning it up but at least she was sober and it wasn't in the truck bed this time.

“Yeah, the Center is a little ways down the road, you'll see an arrow going left, says, ‘Grey Acres.’ Oh, ‘bout a mile down the way.”

“Much appreciated. Can I get that change?”

Bill changed the fifty and as he dropped the coins into my hand, he said, “You know son, why don't you come on down to our church group. The Lord'll fix her right up.” The grin he gave me had too many teeth in it, like we had an understanding or something. We didn't.

“No, thanks. We're on a tight schedule. I don't much believe in that stuff, and I don't believe my sister does either.”

He gave me a nasty look. But then he started kind of chuckling. And then full out laughing. Sounded like one of them hyenas, y'know. I saw some at the zoo over in Albuquerque. Took my little girl when they first got the exhibit. But they spooked me. We came around the corner and I heard them, that creepy high-pitched laugh sending ripples down my back. It didn't help that the zookeeper was feeding them, and decided to tell us stories about how hyenas dig up graves and eat the corpses inside. It's a wonder to me anyone ever got any sleep outside, knowing hyenas were out there, hearing them laughing all around you. In bed that night, I thought I heard them digging in the backyard.

Anyways, I couldn't see what was so damn funny about my sister throwing up all over my truck. It was the withdrawals. She couldn't help it. Just as I was about to give Bill a piece of my mind, he said between chuckles, “Go on, go grab her a Sprite, son. On the h-h-h-ha-ha-ha-house.”

I took my change and the sodas and practically ran out the door. I hoped Annie would have stopped throwing up but she hadn't. She probably hadn't eaten for days but the girl was bottomless. All I could do was pat her on the back. At least she didn't puke in the bed, I told myself. At least she didn't puke in the cab.

"Come on, Annie. Get it out already," I said. Bill was still cracking up in there, holding onto the counter with both hands. Every few minutes, he'd stop, look at us through the window, and start laughing all over again.

"What, am I that disgusting?"

"No, don't be stupid. It's just this guy—"

"You know what Pete, just fuck off. Gimme a b—" and she started throwing up again.

I let her finish while I filled up the truck. She finally stopped and got in the cab. I knew we didn't have time to clean it all up, and I wanted to get the hell out of there so we just took off. She didn't look any worse than before and I hoped she was empty. It was hard to trust a face that blank; it said one thing and did another.

The sign for the rehab center was a square of plywood nailed to a dead grey tree on the side of the road. 'Grey Acres' was painted on it and a wiggly arrow pointed to the left and a narrow dirt driveway. Everything was dirt out here; even the sagebrush was dirt-colored. All the animals were dirt brown, too.

"I don't know about this place, Annie," I said. "You sure this is it? This was the name on the Interweb?"

“First of all, it’s just the ‘internet,’” she said it with those stupid finger quotations. I hate those. “Second of all, I didn’t exactly hear what Mom said when she looked it up. I was barfing my guts out, remember? And third, would it kill you to get GPS for this piece of shit?”

“Look, I don’t need any GPS. Mom told me it was on Highway 60 just north of Datil.”

“That’s all she said?”

“That’s all. And then she and Dad left to feed Bonita, remember? She’s reeling from that colt that came out with two heads. We can’t lose her y’know.”

It was hard. A few days before Annie showed up, Bonita had her colt. We were hoping for another racer, of course. I hate to be dramatic, but it was storming something awful and out in the field we saw her fall in a flash of lightning. We didn’t even have time to get gloves or tarp or anything, just ran out, and the heads were already there, looking up at us. One was breathing, the other just blinked its big black eyes. We scrambled to help her birth it, because the thing had two sets of back legs, too. The sounds she made... And then, it was finally out, and it kicked and thrashed and we rushed them both to the barn. When we were inside, Bonita didn’t seem frightened, let it suckle and everything. It stood up and walked around the barn testing out its legs, wagging its little tails, and shaking its fluffy manes in the warm comfort of the barn. Guess I’m glad it had a little bit of life. It died the next morning.

“You and your prize cow, I swear to God.” She rolled her eyes.

“Hey, that *cow* is a mustang and she’s our best gal,” I said.

When she was a kid, Annie was always begging us to take her to the zoo. And when Mom or Dad said no, she’d go out and tape paper stripes to the cows to make them into zebras. Hank the herding dog with an old mop tied around his head was our lion. I was a giraffe for some reason, probably because I was the tallest. And while she painted my spots on, Annie told

me all about how she was going to win a Nobel Prize in veterinary science. Since when did she not like animals? I couldn't think of a time that she'd ever shown a drop of disdain for another living thing. It was cold when she said it. I felt like I didn't know her at all.

“What the hell is going on with you, Annie?”

“You fucking know already, Pete, you fucking know. You want me tell you again? I'm sorry. I'm here, ain't I?”

Yes, there she was, walking down the long driveway to the ranch. Albuquerque was almost a hundred miles away and we knew she didn't have a car. If she got money for a bus or a cab or if she hitchhiked, we didn't know how. Maybe half of it came from us, but we knew we weren't enough to support her habit. I don't know why she started in the first place but I think she was studying too hard up there at the University. School ain't easy. I get that.

“I know,” I said. I felt like a jerk. “I'm sorry, too.”

“Whatever, nerd. Look, that has to be it. Look at that building over there.” It was a big fancy two-story, with a lot of columns and windows and a balcony and everything. It could use a few repairs, but it was pretty nice for out here. There was a barn, and a thin palomino grazing out in the field. I figured having horses at the Center would help Annie all the more. Horses can fix just about any problem you got. They have human eyes almost, like you could tell them any problem you've got in the world and they'd listen.

We parked the truck in the drive and I helped Annie up the stairs. The door was huge, heavy, pine. It had New Mexican woodworking written all over it: rosettes sliced into the wood, a scene of Jesus distributing fish and loaves to the crowd, and a glossy finish over the hand carving. Annie jabbed the doorbell and the door opened almost immediately.

“Hello there! Name’s Henrietta. What can I do for you folks,” the woman said. She seemed nice enough; she was a little overweight, had a very sweet face, and her dusty brown hair was knotted on top of her head with a kerchief. Her hands were paler than the rest of her from a thick layer of flour, and they shook real bad, just like Bill’s. The house smelled like baking bread.

“Morning ma’am. This is my sister Anita, and I’m Pedro, you can call me Pete. This the rehab center?”

“Oh my, no,” she said, and wiped her hands on her flowery apron. It had lace around the edges. She reminded me of Gran. “Bill send you two over here?” She gestured down the road.

“Yeah, we stopped to fill up and Bill said the Center was gonna be at Grey Acres,” I said. This was a pain as it was, but now we were at the wrong place and I had to embarrass Annie all over again. At least I think she was embarrassed. We barely got the words out of her the night before, even though we knew she’d been on at least meth for at least two years. Maybe more. She didn’t want to say it out loud but she said she wanted to go to rehab. I didn’t want to tell everyone on earth, but I had to if we wanted to get anywhere.

“This is Grey Acres all right, but we run a church group, not a rehab center. Oh, that Bill. I’m afraid he got his wires crossed again. Come on in then, she looks hungry,” and she opened the heavy door wider, waving us inside.

“Look, if you could just give us directions we’d appreciate it,” I said. I was half expecting her to bust out laughing just like Bill did. I didn’t like it.

“Pete, stop being such an idiot,” Annie said, and she dragged me inside. If she had an appetite, I was game.

Henrietta didn't seem so bad at first. She gave us some fresh baked bread and butter, and told us about every soul in town. We got all the gossip—Bobby Ray (the handyman) was sleeping with Sandra (she ran the diner) whose husband Gopher (the mayor) knew but didn't care because he was in a love triangle with Eddie (who ran the post office) and Lucy (the mechanic) whose brother was in a coma from getting into an accident while driving to Lover's Lane with Bobby Ray on the weekend Sandra was out of town. For a while, I was sure this was the storyline of one of Mom's tele-novelas but I can't keep track like she can.

"Sinners. Adulterers," she said, kneading dough with her fists. "If they knew better, they'd come to church and get themselves some redemption."

That struck me as odd, but other than that she was real friendly, good cook, had this collection of porcelain clowns too, which didn't bother me none. People say they're so afraid of clowns but I don't get it. So, they wear make-up and dance and wear puffy clothes—big deal. Try castrating a 2400-pound bull named Diesel. Then come talk to me.

Just then, another man walked in through what sounded like a screen door and said, "Hey Henrietta, got that corn you wanted." He stopped when he saw us and said, "Oh-ho, didn't know you were gonna have company! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, it ain't no big deal, Johnny. Just having a little snack before these two head out on the road." She reached up and patted Johnny on his shaking shoulder. "Why don't you go pull a bag of pecans out of the shed so we can send them with a little something for the road? Then, you come on in, you have yourself some bread, too."

"Will do. I'll be right back," he winked at Annie and went to leave through the front door. And in walks Bill. They said hi to each other and shared a weird look that I couldn't really

name. Smug, I thought, but I've never been good with faces. Horses, I can handle. People are a little harder.

"Hey there, son," Bill said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "You never found the place or what?" His wispy hair was all mussed; he must never have combed it straight after his laughing attack. Even with his cane, he staggered. "I commend your good judgement for coming here instead. This is the kind of help she needs."

"Amen," said Henrietta.

"Amen," said Johnny, as he left for the shed.

"You gave us directions here, Bill," I said. "I asked for directions to the center. And I told you we didn't care for no church group."

Annie leaned on me like she was going to be sick again, but she turned her head to whisper to me, "I wanna go home." She had started scratching her arm again, drawing blood.

"All right Annie, let's leave these nice people and just find it ourselves." I helped her up by the arm hoping that her scratching would give us enough good reason to leave, and walked her to the door.

But the lock wasn't on our side. Our side had a keyhole. I jiggled the handle. Locked. That hyena laughter crept back up again behind me. Each voice fed into the other.

"All right, what's going on here? All I wanted was to take my sister to where she needs to go to get better. You're gonna open that door now. *Now*," I said, I banged my fist on their rickety kitchen table. I didn't have a clue what was going on, but Annie was getting to the Center one way or another and if I had to go through these old bats to do it, I said, so be it.

"I'm sorry, but we're going to have to keep you here," Henrietta said. "The Lord commands it."

“Amen,” said Bill.

“What the hell’re you talking about?”

“Well,” Bill said. “The Lord brings folks down here every so often. And we have ourselves an old-fashioned sacrifice. Way our congregation sees it, we have a duty to consume the bodies of the broken and subsume their sinful souls to God. In His infinite wisdom, we have no doubts.”

As I puzzled over it more, Henrietta said, “Well, we aren’t going to eat *her*. She’s a—” And she paused, crinkling her wrinkled face up into the nastiest look I’d ever seen. If you were there, you would’ve just felt the disgust coming off her, like she’d just walked past a slaughterhouse on the hottest day in a heatwave in July. “She’s a junkie. She’s overcooked hers already. We ain’t gonna eat that Devil’s grits. But you can still be saved, son. Let us usher you into the Kingdom.” That hyena cackle again.

I looked at Annie, wondering if she was hearing the same thing I was. She looked just as terrified as I did, even though they’d just given her a hall pass.

“Okay, y’all need to unlock this door and let us go before I have to kick you and watch the dust come out,” I said, and a few more people with the same mangy look to them walked in the back door. Then, I had an idea and those are so rare for me that I had to bring it up. “Hey, this wouldn’t be some kind of intervention tactic, would it?”

But they all shook their heads and looked at me like I was crazy. As far as I knew, I wasn’t the crazy one. And I was pretty sure Annie would agree with me. She thinks I’m dumb, not crazy.

“No, son. We are an envoy of our Lord and Savior,” Bill said.

“Amen,” the others chanted.

Annie got real still; out of all six of us, she was the one not shaking. “I know what you have. You have kuru,” she said.

I didn’t know what that was so I shrugged. “Don’t shrug your big dumb shoulders at me. Look, these people are sick. Where’re your cows?” She turned to them and pushed Bill in the chest.

“So, we gotta get an ambulance down here? Or something?” I pulled her back toward me. She was way too close to them for comfort.

“No, it’s just about always fatal even with treatment. I don’t exactly know how they’re alive if they’ve been doing this very long. You get it from cows, and...eating brains,” Annie said, and she wasn’t shaking or anything. Her eyes had light in them again, the light they got when she got in the zone. That look in her eye reminded me of her reading. That close up focus I could never seem to develop, no matter how much my teachers tried to pull me away from the ranch. But I had to pull Annie away, because she kept inching closer to get a good look.

Something has to happen here

“All right we’re getting out of here. Now,” I said, and I kicked down the door just like my Dad taught me to: heel out, hit the deadbolt, keep your balance. It didn’t fly off the hinges like I was hoping it would. Because it opened out.

I’d kicked with all of my force and fell over with all of my weight. I heard their eerie laughing but after that, I had a nice dream about Bonita’s colt. I named him Rosco and we rode across the vega into the sunset. I had this dream because Henrietta brought her cast iron pan down onto my face.

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I woke up tied to one of Henrietta's antique kitchen chairs with about twenty bungee cords. I don't know about you, but I never heard of anyone getting tied up with no bungee cords. And it felt like I had a huge hangover. A tequila hangover. Pretty strong old lady, that Henrietta.

The chair creaked every time I moved and I was afraid it would fall out from under me. Vapor rose out of a pot on the stove and sunlight still filtered in through the flowery calico curtains. I heard the screen door creak open. Annie crept up beside me and whispered in my ear, "I ran away when they hit you. Let me get the keys so I can try to start your truck. Then we can get out of here."

"How'd you even get away?"

"Don't worry about it, where are your keys?"

"How do I know you're not gonna leave me here?"

"You're just gonna have to trust me, butthole," she said. Her eyes dug into mine. Half of me expected her to help me. The other half expected her to take off with my wallet and keys like she'd done before. But she was my only chance. I couldn't die this way, tied up by a couple of fossils with a load of bungee cords. I jerked my head to the right and she pulled the keys out of my right-hand pocket. She winked at me, and crept out the side door again, pulling a meat tenderizer off the counter as she went.

About ten minutes went by. And another ten minutes. And another ten minutes. I started screaming, half hoping maybe she'd hear me, half mad at her for ditching me. Bill wobbled in and jabbed me with a fork, "Quiet down, city boy."

I didn't feel like correcting him, I was too mad. He sniffed at the big pot and tasted the red sauce with his fork, smacking his lips and adding a spice here and there.

“Shouldn’t touch that, Bill. Your wife’ll get mad.”

Laughing, he pulled out Henrietta’s heavy pan and started peeling potatoes. “Henrietta ain’t my wife, son. She and the others are God’s followers, help me run the place. Everybody else’s dead,” he pursed his wrinkled old lips and tried the sauce again with his finger.

I repeat, clowns are *not* scary.

Henrietta carried in a gravy dish and a big silver platter and said, “They deserved to die, too. Sinners. Adulterers. Shame anyone else in this God-forsaken state don’t come to Grey Acres. They need to.”

“Amen,” Bill said. They turned back to the stove together and set more pans on it.

Annie wasn’t coming back. I started wiggling the chair. But it didn’t break. So I stretched the bungees. I stretched forward until my chest touched my knees, and finally the back of the chair cracked off, which hurt like hell. Bill and Henrietta whipped around, two rabid coyotes eyeing a meal.

I pulled as many of the bungee cords off as I could but I still had a bundle around my middle when Annie came in, brandishing the meat tenderizer. She held them at tenderizer-point, giving me some time to get up and loose. She walked me out the door, but Bill and Henrietta followed us, gamboling along as fast as their jelly legs would take them. A few others came out of sheds and the barn, too, wobbling like newborn calves.

“The Lord wants your brains to be doused in the healing sauce of Heaven, lest you fall to the barbecue of Hell,” Bill shouted. “You two don’t deserve to live on His Bountiful Green Earth. Bastards! Addicts! We act in the name of the Lord!” He shook his cane at us.

“Amen! Hallelujah,” said Henrietta, making her way down the steps and holding up her skirt. She raised her hands to the sky, like she were willing God to smite us with lightning or something.

We hopped in the truck; Annie'd left the engine running. The heat was blasting and the windows were open, to let the engine cool off. We were both breathing hard and shaking like we'd just run across the llano.

“Was it just me or was that kind of funny,” Annie smiled at me. “The Barbecue of Hell?” We grinned but didn't have time to laugh at it for too long.

“The power of the Lord,” Bill shouted. “You'll find yourself falling under His power now! Stop, and find yourselves weak and weary. Heathens! Cease, lest you surrender the saving power of the Lord.”

“Hallelujah,” said Johnny.

Annie ground the truck into second and we bounced up the road and back onto the highway. Away from those crazy old coyotes with our brains, and our souls, intact.

We drove all the way to Albuquerque that night even though we were exhausted. We stayed in a motel and the next morning we found a good center in the Yellow Pages. The Yellow Pages are a little more my speed. They won't let you put fake stuff in the Yellow Pages. We called the Sheriff's down towards Datil, too.

But they said Bill and Henrietta never gave them no trouble. It didn't trust that so I called the State cops. Turns out, Catron County population dropped by almost 40% in the last five years or something, so they checked out Grey Acres and found close to twenty-five bodies buried on the property. Bill started up a cult based on some dream he'd had and once he got people like

Henrietta to listen, they started frying them up or I don't know what, sending their brains up to the good Lord.

Annie's almost all better now. I think whatever happened that day scared her into going straight. Scared me, too. But I'll always remember her that night as we drove away, her hands pale on the wheel and her eyes still wild with adrenaline.

"Isn't that the first step you need to recover? Belief in a higher power, right?" She heaved a big sigh. "Well, that'll take me a while."

I'm still working on it.