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Cure

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Cure D

Duane spit out the window of the '95 Chevy. Though it was late September, he left the window down. To hell with the Fed who didn't know how to dress for a proper prairie fall. The dented and mud flecked pickup truck rumbled down the two wheel track path that made up the road. In some places the road was deeply rutted, nearly high centering the truck. Other times prairie dog holes and small sagebrush and little remnants of snow obscured the way. Duane Langston took the entire road the same speed.

G. Michael Huxley sat crouched at the other window, one hand on the oh-shit handle, the other scratching Duke, the Australian Sheppard, who sat between them.

"And the property extends to that fence Mr. Langston?" said G. Michael Huxley.

"To the ridge" Duane motioned with one fleck of a finger, beyond the further ridge. He was not interested in small talk with a man with one letter for a first name.

"Oh, right right. I remember the map now."

G. Michael Huxley was not a rancher. He did not have a good coat. His vehicle was made in the last ten years, and was clean. But still, he had said "Mr. Langston, I'm here to evaluate your property" with all the seriousness of one who'd scrutinized a working man's livelihood before.

G. Michael Huxley made a note on the clipboard on his lap. Duane distrusted people who needed clipboards outside an office. They got in the way, clipboards. Papers always fluttering, sliding along bumpy pickup seats, they were not practical. And practical was to be admired. Duane wrote notes on his hands with a pen.

"Where is the cow herd?"

"At the upper creek, Mr. Huxley" said Duane as he shifted the chew in his lower lip with his tongue.

"Please, call me Mike."

Duane looked straight ahead. The Fed's man pretended to be sincere, but Duane could read through his professional bullshit. This Fed couldn't be trusted. None of them could. From the sheriff that locked him up for drinking on the way home in high school—on a desolate highway that he could kill only himself on, as he well remembered arguing—to this man in the cab with him, they were all crooked. Duane had long known G. Michael Huxley would come before long.

They had come for his cousin Clay's place a few years back. The Feds controlled the markets and the banks. They made it impossible to make a

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decent living anywhere but behind a desk and below a boss. And Duane wouldn't stoop to that. So he had refused to pay the Feds any more of the money he earned through blood and sweat. What services had he ever got from them? Piss poor schooling in a one bar town. There was never any talk of him getting scholarships. There were no college recruiters at the football games.

"Deer season doesn't open for another month does it?" said G. Michael Huxley, looking at the .223 that stood next to Duke, resting on the floor board barrel down. Duane's eyes joined G. Michael Huxley's on his Remington.

"It's for coyotes" he said, "and dogs that run." The Chevy shuttered on a particularly big rut.

"Dogs? Like wild dogs?"

Duane did not appreciate being scrutinized by a man who let his fingernails grow longer than the tip of his finger. His own sister didn't grow hers that long. Problem dogs had to be shot.

"One of my cows is worth nine hundred bucks alone, thirteen hundred if she had a calf, and thousands over her life. A stray dog scaring her into barbed wire fences and prairie dog holes isn't worth shit to me." Duane spit again out the open window and looked at that Australian Sheppard between them.

"I see."

Duane shot him a look. "I'd shoot Duke in a heartbeat if he got to runnin." Roscoe, the collie before Duke, had been a great dog, one of Duane's favorites of all the mutts he'd owned. But he just never did get better at "stay." Duane wiped the snot off his mustache with his Carhartt sleeve. G. Michael Huxley looked down at his clipboard and wrote scribbled. The Fed's were probably looking for any reason to put Duane away. Tax evasion or otherwise. They'd just keep at it till he was dead or broke or worse. Duane's knuckles paled on the steering wheel.

Fencing tools clanged and rumbled in the truck bed. An endless amber cloud rose from the mud flaps.

"I used to have a Chevy like this. A '94, blue" said G. Michael Huxley. Duane kept his eyes on the horizon.

"Never could get the radio knobs to stay on either" G. Michael Huxley half smiled and turned a bare stub on the dash. All that was left of a knob. Duane looked at the stub.

"Epoxy." Duane grunted, but did not make eye contact. "Epoxy works, usually."

He had been there at Clay's hearing. Tax evasion. Two years. The tax man came out to the old ranch. The Fed's had an auction. Clay's gun collection went for a good price. They leveled the old barn. He had written one letter

to Clay while he was still inside. I did what I could, but I couldn't keep the guns. I did manage to get Blackie. I'll keep him with Zip and the other horses. I'll buy you a beer when you get out. There were six houses on the old ranch now. He didn't get a letter back.

The barn loomed before them, the only structure for five miles in any direction. Duane sat in the parked truck, unwilling to make the first move. He was not going to give this Fed-man a tour out of generosity.

"Are we going to go into the barn, Mr. Langston? Or would you rather me do my evaluation of your assets without any explanation from you?" The razor burn on his slight double chin jiggled as he spoke. Duane met his pale eyes for a moment before opening the truck door.

G. Michael Huxley first walked up and down the side of the barn that had a lean-to off the roof, and was keeping the hay dry. The pencil pusher puffed on a cigarette as his pen twitched in his hand while he counted rows of round bales. Duane didn't smoke, he chewed. Had since he was thirteen. Men who used their hands, who needed their hands didn't smoke. You could fix fence, mechanic, flip through porn and jack off, all while getting your fix from snuff. Real working men didn't smoke. Duane stood by the door to the barn, and spit.

Inside the barn smelled sweet and dusty. Shit and mud. Hay and cobwebs. Duane took a deep breath. G. Michael Huxley began to scribble, looking at the cooler that held the bottles of Nuflor and syringes Duane used to doctor the cattle. He examined the piecework on the saddles carefully. He took note of the state of the building. Duane watched the son of a bitch as he looked carefully, and even knocked on the wall in a few places. As if that's where Duane had stashed the bags of hidden cash he had hoarded from under-the-table transactions.

Up in the loft sat all the antiques that had belonged to his granddad and great granddad when they had homesteaded this place back in the '30's. He rummaged through and put invented price tags on heirlooms. He said things like "Did you record these on your last return, Mr. Langston?" Duane only glared from the barn floor.

The calves were hard to see in the bright lowering sun. When they moved to the back of the barn, the two others calves got up and trotted out the entryway that led to the outside section of the sick pen. One of the calves though, struggled to get up, and fell back down over and over. Duke tormented it, barking and jumping to lick at it, until exhausted it only laid and stared at them with wild eyes. Duane leaned on the pen's fence and looked at it with furrowed brows.

"What's wrong with it?" G. Michael Huxley said with genuine concern of someone who doesn't work with cattle.

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"Shit. Everything. Its legs won't hold it. It won't eat. Can barely breathe. But mostly it just has I-wanna-die-itis."

"And you've tried doctoring it?"

"You think I wouldn't have tried everything I have for it?" He looked the Fed-lackey up and down. "I brought her in from the pasture two weeks ago. I've brought her water in a bucket twice a day since."

"What does the vet have to say?"

"What do you think Mr. G. Michael Huxley? Do you think I have money for a vet if you're out here assessin me?"

Duane Langston met G. Michael Huxley's eyes. Duane wondered if this man knew how old his coat was. G. Michael Huxley looked away and made a note on his clipboard.

"You can call me Mike."

Duane looked back to the calf laboring for breath. "No, this one aint getting better. Sometimes they just need a bullet."

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Parole came eighteen months into the sentence. Duane drove for eight hours cross-state. He had a twenty-four pack in the back, and a month's wages to spend on a good night on the town. They spent it all. Clay drove all the way home, happy to be out and free. They didn't talk about the ranch much that ride.

Out back, G. Michael Huxley played twenty questions with Duane and his equipment. He asked the make and model of the tractor. Had Duane's father bought the swather attachment new? He asked how old the bale mover was. Where was the title for the truck? When had he bought the baler? Was there any more equipment? What about in the shop back at the house? Where were the manuals? G. Michael Huxley made little scratching notes next to the list of assets Duane was supposed to have. Duane watched his biggest investments get jotted down as "liquefiable assets" and "action items."

"Why do you even fucking ask all these questions if it's all there on your little papers?"

"Because it's protocol. I have to make sure you're not lying to us anymore Duane. Can I call you Duane?"

"No."

When they got back to the truck, Duane realized his jaw muscles ached.

The herd was at the creek, just as Duane knew they would be. The S Lazy J ranch was not big, but it could support the eight hundred head on a good year. The Black Anguses were hard to see in the shadows of the cedars. Only their slow plodding and the twitch of yellow ear tags gave them away.

"You have how many head of cattle here Mr. Langston?"

"Seven hundred sixty eight." He had sold some to his neighbor the week

before. Cash, in case he needed it.

"I see" he said, making a note.

Duane took another pinch of chew as he looked out at the herd that he and his father and sister and Clay had worked, doctored, and helped calve since the cows were calves themselves.

"Do you have any other live assets besides your cow herd Mr. Langston?"

He wondered if they would count the pack of barn cats as "live assets."

Knowing the feds, they'd sell them off too. "No. Just the cattle."

"No horses? My records indicate you own five registered quarter horses."

His long fingernails flipped through his clipboard papers that apparently held tabs on all of Duane's material possessions. He wanted to rip the clipboard out of G. Michael Huxley's hands.

"Unless you wanna pull them out of the dead pile in the gulch west of the house and sell um as dog food, I suspect they aint worth much."

"They all died, Mr. Langston?" He said it as if he were back in grade school and being scolded. He was not buying into it.

"West Nile. Is that legal? Can my horses have died from that West Nile Virus or do you want to autopsy them just to see?"

"No" said G. Michael Huxley, and he made a note on his clipboard.

Clay tried ranch hand jobs. He worked for Duane for a while. Then the Marsh's up the road. He slept on Duane's couch for a few months before he found a cheap trailer to rent. Too proud to be a squatter. He started driving a "PILOT CAR FOLLOW ME" truck during the summer to make a bit more cash for rent. He came out to ride Blackie less one month, then not at all the next. That fall, Clay started a job at the feed store, keeping stock. He wore a uniform that had his name in little gold letters above the pocket.

The sun was just over the West hills when they made the circle back to the house. Duane parked the truck, and waited for the stranger to get the hell out of his truck. G. Michael Huxley paged over his clipboard.

"I'll have to come back out tomorrow to go over the house and more of the outbuildings."

Duane imagined doing this all again tomorrow. He thought of all the items in the house. Things that were Mom and Dad's. Writing off Mom's coveted crystal china as just an "instantly liquefiable asset." Sold off just like Aunt Gina's china. Tossed out just like Clay's life had been. Auctioned off to pay for some government program for yuppies in California. He tensed when he imagined this stranger going through his bedroom, finding the magazines in his bedside table, peering into the crawl space and going through the freezer. But mostly, he thought of the hollow in Clay as he put on that uniform each morning. He knew it would come to this. He knew he was too far into this to go back on it now. He had known the Feds would come to him before long.

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"I have to work tomorrow. I actually have to get things done. I can't be your guide."

G. Michael Huxley read the defiance in his voice.

"Mr. Langston, you are under investigation for tax evasion." He said it with a slow, grating emphasis that Duane tensed at. "I don't need you to take me out to further property tomorrow. I will take account of your assets with or without you."

Duane stared out the bug smattered windshield. He clenched his fist.

"But I had hoped you'd be a bit more cooperative than your cousin."

Duane slammed his fist on the dash. Duke started and yelped. G. Michael Huxley sat, unblinking.

"I think for record's sake, I had better go out and verify those horses. Maybe call a vet out to get a blood sample" said G. Michael Huxley.

"The virus won't be alive in a dead horse, Huxley." He said through his teeth. He felt the sick in his stomach like he was slipping.

"All the same" he said, "I'd like to be thorough."

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The drive out to the dead pit in the gulch was a silent one. The Chevy bumped along the darkening road. Duane spit out the window every few minutes. G. Michael Huxley stared through the rock chips at the open prairie.

The gulch was a deep wash-out on one branch of the creek. It was indistinct from all the other rills and ravines in the landscape except for one large Russian Olive tree that stood like a living tombstone to the carcasses of the livestock and furniture it overlooked. Duane stopped the truck and shut it off. G. Michael Huxley got out and walked to the gulch. He looked striking and out of place in his slacks against the grass and yucca. He didn't belong. Langstons belonged here. Duane told Duke to stay in the pickup as he got out.

Duane's throat was like drying mud. He would not be end up like his cousin. Not like Clay, brains spattered all over the trailer ceiling. A pistol in one hand, a note with FUCK THE FED'S in the other. The horses were dead; it didn't need to be questioned. His sister needn't be investigated over five new horses that were getting fat and growing hair over their brands. At least those she should have.

Duane felt for the .223. He grasped it, the cold barrel, he told himself, made him release. But hadn't he burned those tax forms for a reason? Either way the day ended, it would be in jail time. He couldn't let G. Michael Huxley ruin another Langston. He pulled out the rifle with two hands. He felt around in the side compartment of the door for a cartridge. His hands shook so bad, he dropped more shells than he put in. Clay, hollow-eyed, stroking Blackie clouded his eyes.

"Mike" he said, with a crack in his voice, "look this way."