

Steven Taylor

Rudy Lee Goes To Church

It was a beautiful Sunday morning when the town of China Grove discovered the true meaning of evil. I was nervous as I sat in my pew listening to Father Leonard's sermon that Sunday morning. Next to me Becky Hansen, the girl I had been in love with since she let me touch her boob in the seventh grade during a game of truth or dare, was sweating just a little. I was watching a drop make its way down her neck and thinking to myself that it was kind of sexy, a totally inappropriate thought to have in church, when the moment she and I knew would come finally did.

The huge wooden doors at the back of the church exploded open with such force that the stained glass windows portraying the Stations of the Cross rattled in their ancient frames. I heard Mrs. Vandermeer mutter an exasperated "Oh my!" and several others in the congregation gasped in surprise. Father Leonard stammered to a stop and the parishioners turned around with excited looks on their faces, almost like they were expecting Christ himself to come floating down the aisle. What they got instead was Rudy Lee Mayfield. He did several cartwheels on his way past us, and then did a bizarre little dance before coming to rest in front of the altar. When Rudy Lee made it to the front, he stopped and turned, grinning that crooked, yellow grin of his. It looked like a diseased ear of corn set between two rolls of bologna. He was dressed in an immaculate white suit with a red shirt and black tie, and he wore a Santa Claus pin on his lapel. This was strange since it was May. On his fat head sat a fat, black cowboy hat. It had a rattlesnake band with the feather of one of

old man Carver's emus sticking out of it. Under the hat, a pair of wire rimmed glasses, sort of like the ones John Lennon wore but not as fashionable, shaded a gin-blossomed nose and two colorless eyes. The outfit was made complete by a pair of white boots so shiny that Rudy probably knew what color underwear every girl in the congregation was wearing.

"What're ya'll starin' at? It's Sunday. Let's party!" he yelled in his thick southern drawl. And with that, he proceeded to execute a series of drunken twirls and leaps in front of the altar, humming a demented tune to himself as he went.

Rudy Lee Mayfield was the most well known man in China Grove. He owned Rudy Lee's Imports and Used Car Emporium out on the highway, where my dad took me to buy my first car, along with 12 other used car dealerships scattered across the southwest. He also owned two Waffle Houses on Highway 87, a Starbucks just outside San Antonio and a semi-professional roller derby team called the Bexar Bulldykes. He was in charge of the mayor's re-election committee and was doing a better job of making the other guy look bad than of making the mayor look good. He was president of the rotary club and Grand Poobah the local Moose Lodge. He was a big man, but not in a bad way. He was tall, a little over six feet, and heavy, around two-eighty, so he looked like a football player. Folks in China Grove were sure they could remember him being a hero of the high school team, but nobody could really remember when or at what position. And as long as anyone could remember, Rudy Lee had been in China Grove, sitting in a beat up vinyl recliner outside the office of his car lot, smoking cherry-vanilla tobacco in his pipe and grinning that awful grin. Yes, everyone in town thought they knew Rudy Lee, but there was one thing they didn't know about him. Something that I wished I didn't know. Something I feared everybody in that church was about to find out.

The Saturday I found out the truth about Rudy Lee began like any other Saturday. I had been working at the Emporium, washing cars to work off the debt I still owed on the beautiful, sky blue Pontiac Trans Am that Rudy had talked me into buying. It had been a car I couldn't afford, but three different girls had stopped and smiled at me as we took it for

a test drive, so I had to have it. Rudy Lee told me the car was a “chick magnet” and if I drove it for a week, I’d have every hottie in town wanting to rip off her clothes for me. I protested that the car was too much money, but Rudy Lee told me that was just nonsense and he talked me into signing on the dotted line. The next thing I knew, I was spending my weekends as a human car wash. I don’t remember agreeing to that as part of the deal for the car, but I felt strangely compelled to be there bright and early every Saturday morning.

Usually when I showed up on Saturday morning, I’d find Rudy Lee in his beat up old chair stuffing his pipe full of that sickeningly sweet smelling cherry vanilla blend he loved so much, but that particular Saturday, Rudy Lee had been nowhere in sight when I arrived. I peeked in the office and called his name, but got no response. It didn’t matter; I knew what needed to be done, so I went to work. When three hours passed with no sign of him, I started feeling a bit jumpy. The car lot was kind of spooky when Rudy Lee was there, but with nobody else around every little sound made me jump. I finished waxing a 1977 Gremlin and was about to give up on Rudy Lee and call it quits for the day, when I heard a noise from behind the office. It sounded like someone talking. In fact, it sounded like Rudy Lee talking. So I went around back to check it out.

I had never thought to ask Rudy Lee where he lived. I would have thought that owning a car lot would bring in lots of cash, but I guess I thought wrong.

He was holed up in a little trailer behind his car lot. The trailer was rocking pretty hard, leading me to guess something good was going on inside. My curiosity got the best of me, and I just had to peek and see what kind of a woman would go for a ride on the Rudy Lee Express. I couldn’t see through the dirty windows, so I snuck around and opened the trailer door a crack. What I saw almost made me puke.

I slammed the door and started running, but nothing could remove the image of what I'd seen. I ran with my eyes closed, images flashing through my head. Blood. A snake wrapped around a sickly white thigh. A goat head. And what appeared to be a leathery wing.

“Well howdy, Matt!” Rudy Lee’s voice suddenly issued from in front of me. I opened my eyes to find him towering over me. “What brings you out here on this particularly lovely day?”

I heard another noise in the distance and had the fleeting thought that it must be the decapitated goat head, until I ran out of breath and realized the sound was me screaming.

“Well dang, I plum forgot today was car washing day. Must have slipped my mind. Did you get that Gremlin cleaned up? We have a potential sucker coming in this afternoon,” Rudy Lee said.

Dumbfounded, I nodded. As he spoke, the putrid stench of raw flesh stuck between his rotting teeth washed over me, leaving me flirting with consciousness. Not knowing what else to do, I stayed on my knees and stared at the ground. After a few minutes, I looked up again and he was gone. I jumped up, ran to my Trans Am, which had inexplicably turned from baby blue to primer gray, and drove straight to Becky’s house. I had to tell her what I had just seen.

I spilled everything to her, the blood, the snakes, the supernatural speed and my car suddenly turning into an ugly piece of shit.

“C’mon Matt,” she said. “You said yourself that place is creepy on a good day. Couldn’t it have been your mind messing with you?”

“No. I know what I saw. At first I thought maybe he was doing some kind of voodoo ritual or something. But now I wonder...”

“Wonder what?” she asked.

“Well,” I said. “I wonder if maybe he’s some kind of...demon or something.”

“Matty, are you hearing yourself? You really think that your boss, the man who sold you your car, is a monster? That’s ridiculous!”

“What about the car? This morning it was gorgeous, and now it looks like something that crawled its way out of a wrecking yard. How do you explain that?”

“Well, you were in a hurry to get out of there,” she said, trying desperately to chalk this up to some logical explanation. “Maybe you jumped in the wrong car by mistake. I think you just need to rest and think about this calmly. There has to be a reasonable explanation for all of this.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” I asked her.

“Baby, if what you say is true, I don’t *want* to believe it. I know you think you saw something, I just think we need to not jump to conclusions. Especially conclusions that involve demons”

I sighed. “I don’t know what to think right now. I’m just glad I have you to talk to about it, or I’d be going crazy right now.”

We lay back on the bed and made out for a while. That was Becky’s way of getting my mind off things. Usually, it worked like a charm, but this time-

My phone jingled out its familiar text message tune. I reached over, picked it up and looked at the screen, immediately recognizing Rudy’s number. I opened the text.

“MATT. U 4GOT 2 CLEAN THE OLD MUSTANG. PLEASE DO SO NEXT SATURDAY. ALSO PLZ DO NOT TELL ANYONE WHAT YOU SAW 2DAY. OR I WILL KILL THEM AND THEN KILL U. ;D L8R.”

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The rest of the week had been surreal. Rudy Lee kept calling, but I was too scared to talk to him and he wouldn't leave any voicemails. I had to drive in silence, because every time I turned on the radio it played Van Halen's "Running with the Devil." On Wednesday morning, I went to the donut shop and found someone had bought up everything except the devil's food. Glancing outside, I thought I caught a glimpse of that white suit disappearing around the corner. I kept getting threatening text messages from unknown numbers saying things like, "Im watching u!" and "watch ur back" and "Hows Becky?"

That was a week ago. I didn't go back to the lot to wash cars this weekend. And now, Rudy was here, in the one place I thought I'd be safe, and he was laughing like a maniac. I wanted to scream, but found myself incapable of anything more than a squeak. That squeak was all it took for Rudy Lee to notice me in the crowd.

"Matthew Francis! How the hell are ya, boy? How's that purdy car of yours?"

"It needs a paint job," I said, surprising myself with the casual sound of the voice that only seconds before had eluded me. I figured that talking to Rudy Lee like this could be hazardous to my health, but I couldn't stop the words from coming out of my mouth.

"What the hell did you do to it, you motherfu-" I was stopped by my mother's hand, slapping me hard in the face.

Rudy seemed amused by my show of bravado. The rest of the congregation was most decidedly not amused. Father Leonard looked at me disapprovingly, because I had almost used one of the "seven words you can't say on TV" in his church. Becky was asking me with her eyes what the hell I was doing. Then there was my mother. Mom stared me down with a look that would make a polar bear shiver. She dug her talons into my shoulder, and was about to read me the riot act, when Pauline Swann, the town busybody, worked her way into the aisle Rudy Lee had been dancing down only moments before, garnering every parishioner's attention. Rudy turned his disgusting grin toward her.

"Pauline Swann, you look simply radiant this morning," he said. "What can I do for you?"

“Well,” Pauline began in her annoying sing-song voice, “you can come down off of that altar and let Father Leonard finish mass for one thing.”

“Meh meh memeh meh mememeh,” Rudy Lee mocked her, in a high-pitched imitation of her voice that was more frightening than annoying. “I will do no such thing, ma’am. In fact, I think I would like you to join me up here for a dance.”

With that, Rudy waved his right hand and all of Pauline’s limbs jerked at once. I would have laughed, if I hadn’t been so terrified. Like a marionette from Hell, Pauline jerkily worked her way up to the altar, and settled next to Rudy Lee, who put his arm around her in much the same way parents were now putting their arms around their children. Father Leonard made a move toward Rudy Lee, but with a wave of his left hand Rudy Lee sat the priest right back down. Then things got really ugly.

Through the church’s sound system, we heard the first guitar chords of Norman Greenbaum’s “Spirit in the Sky.” Rudy grabbed Pauline around her fat waist and began dancing with her. It was a strange mix between a two-step and the twist. Calm seemed to come over Pauline’s frightened face, and she managed to smile. Then she began singing along with the song as they danced. When she and Norman sang the line, “I’ve got a friend in Jesus,” Rudy shot his left hand through her chest and pulled out her heart.

“Guess it’s a good thing she and Junior are buddies, huh?” Rudy asked the flabbergasted congregation.

Husbands held tight to their wives. Mothers covered the eyes of their children. Old ladies grasped their rosaries, frantically repeating their Hail Marys. Marcus Jameson tried to lead his family through the big wooden doors, only to have them slam shut on his arm, leaving him staring at a bloody nub as his wife screamed herself hoarse. Jackson Reilly attempted to jump through the stained glass window depicting Jesus falling down, and managed to impale himself on the

jagged glass of the cross. And Becky Hansen, for some reason, got up from her seat and started up the aisle toward Rudy Lee.

I watched in horror as the girl I loved walked towards certain death. My heart was pumping out its own techno beat. I tried to call out to Becky, but my voice was gone again. I didn't know what else to do, so I closed my eyes and prayed.

“Dear God, I know I haven't been the best example of Christian morals over the years,” I began, “but if you could just see fit to come down and smite this asshole, I promise I'll do better. Please?”

This was it. Our world would end on a Sunday morning, before we even got to Shoney's for brunch. My family, my friends, and my girl were all going to die. And it was my fault. I just had to go and look in that damned trailer.

Suddenly, a warm presence radiated through my body. My heart slowed down and I felt completely calm. I watched quietly as Becky distracted the Devil with her right hand, brandishing her grandmother's crucifix in his face, while reaching with her left hand for the Bible she had stuck in the hip of her jeans. She brought the good book up hard, under his chin. I saw a corn kernel tooth fly through the air. Then Rudy Lee laughed and grabbed Becky by the throat.

“Oh my,” he said with blood running down his chin, “you and me is gonna have us a whole mess of fun, little girl.”

I was horrified at the idea of him even touching Becky, but I decided that the warm, peaceful feeling washing over me must be the hand of God and thought I would see where it took me. It pulled me quickly up one of the side aisles, out of Rudy Lee's view, and led me to hide behind the organ. I had just begun to wonder why I was there, when I looked up and saw the Virgin Mary. Well, I saw a statue of her. It was a really big statue of her, situated almost directly behind Rudy Lee, who seemed angry about losing a tooth.

I crept over to the statue and gave it a light shove to make sure I could handle it. It was pretty heavy, but to my surprise it was also quite unstable. Guided by the calm, I rose to my full height and, remembering what I had heard from my mother many times as a child, called out to the monster that was Rudy Lee.

“Rudy Lee Mayfield!” I yelled, drawing his attention. “This is *not* how we behave in church!”

Then I heaved myself against the statue. As the giant Virgin Mary toppled towards Rudy Lee, everything slowed down. I saw the look of shock on my mother’s face. I saw the approving look in Father Leonard’s eyes. I saw entire families using the distraction to try and make a break for the doors. I saw the confused horror on Rudy Lee’s face, turn into a bloody grin. Then I saw him do a quick sidestep, leaving Becky Hansen directly in the path of the falling icon. I watched numbly as a look of fear spread across Becky’s face, as she was crushed by the Mother of God.

The church became silent. The warm feeling inside me turned white hot. Rudy Lee Mayfield cackled as he wiggled his fingers, drawing me against my will to stand beside him. He laughed even harder when he made me hug him, smiling involuntarily as hot tears ran down my face. I wanted to kill him.

“Well I’ll be damned!” Rudy Lee said, giggling. “That there was hilarious! You got a gift boy. I was fixin’ to kill you, but I think I might be able to find a use for someone like you.”

“Why?” I asked him in a whisper. “You bastard. Why did you have to come here?”

“Why? Well boy, this is the one place on this horrible planet where I can relax. I don’t have to deal for souls, don’t have to facilitate possessions, don’t even have to tempt anybody. I like it here; the lazy feel of this town. You have no idea how hard it is being me. Everywhere I go, people are cursing and rebuking me. But here, I can kick back, relax, and smoke my pipe. You threatened to screw all of that up for me you sneaky little shit. Besides, I gave you fair warning.”

“Fair warning? I get a text message from the devil, and that’s considered fair warning?” I was furious, sobbing. But I couldn’t move. Then the window exploded.

“Rudy Lee Mayfield! You are under arrest! Step away from the boy and put your hands behind your head. Now!” I had never been so happy to see Sheriff Bronson in my life, and crashing through Simon Peter helping Jesus was pretty outstanding as entrances go. But Rudy wasn’t budging.

“My dear Sheriff,” he said, “how stupid do you think I am? The moment I step away from the boy, you are going to open fire. Besides, your silly bullets won’t hurt me.

From behind us, I heard, “Maybe this will, dickhead.” Then Deputy Flint stepped up and shot Rudy Lee in the chest with his taser. It may not have hurt him, but it distracted him just enough for me to break free. I scrambled over next to Becky’s lifeless body.

“I’m so sorry baby,” I sobbed. “I’m so sorry.”

I looked up just in time to see the deputy fly over me and into the fourth pew. Rudy was up, and he was pissed. He was starting to lose control of himself. One side of his stylish hat had been pierced by a horn that resembled a mountain goat’s. His Santa Claus pin had fallen to the floor and been crushed to red and white dust under what appeared to be a hoof.

I felt another, different warmth coursing through me. It seemed to come from Becky. It guided me to pick up the crucifix lying on the ground next to her and run towards Rudy Lee, screaming.

I hit him square in the chest, right where his heart should have been. He looked down at the cross sticking out of him, then calmly looked up at me, laughing.

“You are mine now, boy,” he yelled as he pulled me tight to his side. I saw a light emanating from the spot where the crucifix had penetrated his chest. Then he exploded in a brilliant white flash and everything went dark.

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By the next month, the congregation had managed to get the new church nearly built, and the bishop even came to town to bless it. He presided over the funeral for Becky, which I attended even though I couldn't bear the sight of her. When it was over I placed a single red rose on the coffin and stood there staring at it until they made me leave. The bishop declared me a hero which made me laugh. On the way home from the funeral I stopped at Rudy Lee's Imports and Used Car Emporium. I stopped the Trans Am, stepped out onto the gravel lot, and dropped the keys in the front seat. And as I walked away from the lot, and China Grove, daydreaming about what might have been, I filled my pipe with cherry vanilla tobacco and contemplated where my next vacation would take me. And cursing that stupid boy.