



Dust

His calves pumped with lactic acid buildup from the climb. Tiny balloons of napalm inflated and popped, spilling gelatinous corrosive gel onto unwitting muscle fibers. The levee of black hair that dissuaded the drenching sweat on his forehead finally gave way to violent sweltering surges. Blubbering nightcrawlers of his nine year-old lips wiggled like they were on the business end of a hook as he struggled up the incline.

Come on, son. Don't cry. There's no time for that now. We're coming to the top of the hill, and your mother thinks we need this. Whatever *this* is, he brought it home. This wasn't Seymour's idea of a good time. Len's tone of voice echoed that sentiment, his lack of enthusiasm granted some amnesty from clenched teeth holding his cigarette.

For a man whose own lungs were coated in generous crusting of tar, Len had a surprising amount of stamina. Seymour's pleura burned the way he thought Len's should, and yet, the father and son bonding exercise seemed easy for him. Watching his father grow more distant with each step, it filled Seymour with the earliest form of resentment known to him. It didn't seem fair.

This was mom's fault, he thought, as every step produced a scalding throb that shot from heel to hamstring. She was often guilty of over-romanticizing Len's importance to Seymour. I need my boys to spend some time doing boys things, she told Seymour before he left. Little did she know the nurturing idea that came from a place of love for both husband and son was going to get one of them killed.

The night before he had overheard the vaguest argument about how he wasn't spending enough time with his son. It came single-wrapped in the form of an unforgettable prompt from his mother and just after Len asked what *exactly* he was supposed to do with 'the boy.'

Show him a piece of yourself. Seymour knew very little about his dad in those years, and he would have to wait a few more seasons to get the full Leonard Murphy experience. His father's acquiescence to this maternal order came in the form of an early morning hike up a little Mount referred to Buckhorn residents as 'Old Baldy', a favored hillside Len often found himself climbing in his own youthful waste.

He told his supposed only son this on the way to the base of the hill, then told him the goal was to be done with it by no later than lunch time.

Do you think you can handle that?

The hill looked more intimidating than was initially described. The trees opened up into a small clearing like a mouth to swallow them into the wooded hillock. An entrance to the belly of the beast, it felt like.

Can't we just *say* we did the hike? Seymour's question was a hopeful one as he eyed the crooked wreath of branches that formed the maw. He often found his father traversing the path of least resistance with the lowest possible expenditure to himself. He thought there might yet be an outside shot.

Len thought about that for a minute. The pause gave Seymour some hope. But for reasons unknown to Seymour, possibly the personal nostalgia of the moment, Len stuck to his guns for the first time Seymour could recall. No, son, he said, let's just get this over this. He wondered if it was because his dad hated him for some reason.

The damndest time for him to find his scruples meant the most unfortunate of consequences for Seymour, who, nearing the top of the hill, was dipping into his last reserves. He hadn't really expended himself too terribly except for the last six minutes, and then, once the gradient increased to a hellish upslope, he felt his legs bound and his guts churning up nauseating gastric butter.

His father ahead slalomed up the hill effortlessly by grappling the bodies of immature sugar maples. Weaving like a brachiating primate.

So averse to Len's way of doing things was Seymour that even at nine, he wanted to do things the exact opposite. But his resolve had given way to exhaustion. He wondered if maybe Len was onto something.

And so he opted for this example. Seymour surged ahead and reached out for the nearest skinny maple. He grunted as he achieved full stretch and put finger pads to its coarse skin, curling uncertain digitalis muscles around the bend. The valiant effort to wrap his wrist around the business end of the truck that was to be in vain, propelling himself up by inches before his grip gave out and he went crashing to the soil with a loud *oomph*.

His father called him from his spot atop the hill. Get up, kid. It was a command that smacked of annoyance. Not a statement of encouragement or advice. No incoming loving fatherly cliché about sticktoitiveness and the importance of determination.

Get up, the second jab, somehow less patient than the first. Seymour rolled himself to his stomach and lifted his head off the ground like a sick animal. Wicked scorched breaths stung like droplets from a lead acid battery. His heartbeat rampant like a hummingbird's.

This is pathetic. The raw impatience. Seymour let out a fragile little whimper and curled up like a salted slug agonizing with a swift brine. Every part of him hurt. His young body was an undeveloped machine not meant for the rigors of a mountainside venture. His mother unwittingly sent him on a death march with a man who now seemed like he was charged with the task of dispatching of him in the woods and berating him while he did so.

You just gonna lay there? Len's raspy nicotine poisoned voice echoed. *Come on, kid. Dust it the fuck off, and let's get this over with.*

The challenge laid down was too much. I can't, Seymour called back weakly. I can't do it. It was an admission of weakness that was not commonly permissible, but in this moment of ultimate weakness, for some reason he forgot it wouldn't fly. And it did not.

He heard dead branches and fallen leaves cracking under testy footsteps. As the crackle grew louder, Seymour's instincts kicked in and he tried to shoot to his feet. Before he could bring himself to stand, a dry hand caught him under the sleeve of his t-shirt and propelled him to his feet. Upon reestablishing a foundation on earth, his calves resumed the deep acidic sear. He winced in obvious discomfort.

Do you know what your problem is? He didn't speak as much as he did hiss.

Seymour pathetically shook his head, trying to avoid eye contact. The lateral side of Len's pointer finger bent into a crook that found its way under his chin and forced his head up. He knew that meant he needed to peel his eyes open at once, or else.

You ain't never gonna be a man. He laughed. Look at you. Laying here on the ground. You got no grit, kid. You're gonna be stuck suckling at your mama's teat forever. Sad.

Forever? Tears pooled in the nook of his lower lid.

Afraid so, he reinforced. You ain't cut out for this world. This is a forty-five minute hike. It's less than a mile uphill, and you can't even hack that, for *chrissake*. When I was eight I could've beat your grandfather up this damn hill. I did this damn thing six times a day back then. I could do it in my sleep. You couldn't do it once right now if you wanted to.

Seymour nodded his head in acknowledgment, though he wasn't completely sure what exactly he was agreeing to. The harsh caw of a nearby crow augmented Len's taunts.

You hear that bird? That bird thinks you're dead meat, I'm sure of it. Good thing I'm here with you, otherwise it might try to pick at you. That's called premature decay.

It was his direct but cutting approach to fatherhood that prepared Seymour Murphy for this life, though he was sure today more than ever that it was never his father's intention to teach anything aside from how to divorce in disgrace. It was always the action following the flash bang that needed attention. He learned nothing from the clubbing blows of his father's bluntness, and everything from the consequences.

Sadness and fear was all he felt taking the incoming from his dad. He tried to snuffle oozing green trails back into his crying shriveled face, father telling him he was basically already earmarked for an abrupt, if pitiable life.

Do you hate me? Seymour asked, looking up at his father.

No. It was a quick response. Okay, he thought. That was encouraging. He didn't dare ask the converse question.

What do I have to do? To not be this way?

Finish something, for shit sake. You're old enough. It might not save you long term, but maybe it'd be a good start to not be so damn weak.

Seymour gulped. Okay. Do you think I can do it?

Len shrugged. No.

Well I'm going to try. I'm sorry, dad. You know. For crying.

His father nodded. Don't die, he said crudely, your mother will never let me hear the end of it.

He took several deep breaths, tried to collect himself. Okay. Here goes nothing.

It wasn't my fault.

It wasn't my fault.

It wasn't, honey.

Kid just slipped near the top of the hill. Couldn't be helped. I tried, Len said. His voice was more full of emotion than Seymour was accustomed to. Either he was experiencing a genuine response of regret or it was completely fabricated to save his own hide. Seymour erred on the latter being the case.

The fluorescent lighting of the Jefferson County critical access hospital was a headache lying in wait. Seymour's right hand throbbed, but the worst was over. The doctor had form-fitted the plaster to his wrist and splinted it with fiberglass casting material.

He'd taken quite the fall. He came about nine feet from the top, but when the incline reached its sharpest steep, he slid off the back of the tree and skipped down the hill like a rock across the pond, abrading his skin in spots, and losing a layer altogether in others. Apart from the parasitic wriggle of burning bugs under his dermis, the only real injury was a broken wrist. Mom was told to follow up with orthopedics to begin the week. They might need to put a pin in the hand through his third finger.

It sounded ominous enough that Seymour nearly whimpered. His mother coddled him on the emergency room cot while he waited for discharge papers, but looking over her shoulder, he saw Len's eyes catch his. A cold, dead stare. A little reminder of an unspoken omertà between father and son that there was something explicitly wicked about selling one another out for prospective misdeeds.

It was the phone call he'd received from his father the morning of the Rise To Greatness pre-show that triggered the memory.

He hadn't heard from Len since Father's Day. It wasn't an uncommonly long period of time for the Murphy men to go without talking. It was just that the timing and the content of the call were equal amounts of strange.

Where are you, son?

Washington state, he lied flatly.

Working, huh.

Yeah. Working.

Seymour stared out the window of his hotel high rise into the perilous urgency of urban hell. It was not to be understated how uncomfortable he was with these accommodations. Maya laid in bed, naked under six-hundred thread count sheets at 1200, watching Seymour pace in their suite with some concern. So was Legion, curled up at the foot of the bed, poised to spring into action.

Well, I won't keep you from the *oil fields*, then, he said. I just wanted to call and give you a reminder. Len was smart. By now Seymour was certain that based on a plethora of circumstances that his dad knew he was, in fact, Waylon Creek.

What's that?

I've always been proud, kid.

Oh?

I just wanted more for you. My therapist helped me realize I had a regrettable way to show it.

Intent is a poor substitute for accuracy, Seymour said flatly. But I do appreciate it. Really. It's not like it affected my life or anything like that.

Saying it out loud, he wasn't sure how untrue that was. He was currently 9-0 in SCW with a big title defense later in the evening. Maybe it said something.

Yeah, well. We're not always aware of the damage we're doing when we're doing it, said Len. Accountability isn't a straight line, after all.

It sounded to Seymour like an AA platitude. Yeah, he finally mustered, I guess not.

Well, anyways, I won't keep you. I just wanted to tell you good luck.

Right. I'll tell the rest of the rig you gave your regards to us hitting it crude.

Don't bullshit me, kid.

I'm sorry?

I said don't bullshit me. You know what I mean.

Seymour said he was afraid he didn't follow. Could you please be more specific? He swallowed a gush of nervous saliva. Maya silkily drifted to the foot of the bed next to Legion, stroking his forearm gently. It didn't help with what must have been an obvious torrent of anxiety.

You're doing my move out there. You haven't used your right hand for anything significant since you broke it the summer of our hike. And then he said three words he'd hoped to never hear from his father. *I know you.*

Dad, this is really cryptic and weird. I don't know what you're talking about at all.

Yeah, well, I guess we'll see about that, won't we. Oh, and son.

"Yeah."

"Go finish something, for shit sake."

Maybe not the most fatherly way to say good luck. Any hopeful thought that Seymour had that his father didn't know what he was doing in his professional life now thoroughly put to bed, a new feeling crept over him. He grew into it throughout the day like it was a hand me down. The boy that once felt sadness and fear climbing up Old Baldy now felt something completely different.

It spilled over into his attitude before the match even started, which could have been best described as surly. Legion operated on critical threat level, at the ready to defuse any potential combustion. He did his job commendably, but once the bell rang, he was a tool that rendered effectively useless. And that's where Seymour really started to struggle.

The conversation with Len had proven to be somewhat of a distraction, sure, but the *real* issue was that Seymour, as Waylon Creek, had never been in the ring with somebody who had so many years under his belt. Chris Lawler worked over his right hand like he was a political prisoner at Gitmo. Probing for answers. Looking for a solution.

Seymour was looking for answers, too. Though externally he seemed like a man of supreme confidence, without the mask, he was an average operator at best and poorly equipped to cope with pressure. He had some genuine fear that he was about to be exposed. His right hand pulsed with every new beat of his heart, filling with fluid from what felt like it was an obvious metacarpal fracture. His fingers felt devoid of anything resembling a modicum of grip strength.

If it wasn't for a mistake made by the veteran, he may well have been exposed. The man known as Waylon Creek saw his opportunity and made the most of it, with Lawler landing awkwardly on the buckle. The DDT he followed it up with should have been the prelude to the Canary. But for some reason, he just froze.

No.

Get up. He heard the voice manifest in the bullet chamber of his brain and boom with authority.

Get up. The audience noise faded slowly to the faintest little dog whistle.

Get up. He heard Legion whimper, then pant.

He was nine years old again, on the side of Old Baldy, laying in some brush, wrist broken. Trying not to cry. Trying to avoid being scolded by his own father for being incompetent.

This is pathetic. Len's voice, starkly contrasting his frail attempts at encouragement. His resentment towards his con man father for being smart enough to figure out he was Waylon Creek.

An out of body experience, he saw himself lost in the entanglement of weeds. He screamed from the agony of a compound fracture, but really, he was circling the ring, clutching the hand that Lawler had spent the match rendering into a pulpy useless mit.

And then, he saw it all. His sadness and fear on the hill bled out. What was left was a wraith of sheer rage and hatred. He smelled his father's cigarette closing in on him. From his station in the thicket, wrist turned into the vague shape of a capital U, he stood up before a galled Len Murphy could arrive at his side. He charged him with ill intent, his prepubescent nine year old voice doing its best to sound intimidating. He wrapped his arms around his legs, planting Len into the soil as if he'd been suddenly endowed with supernatural strength.

He raised his crooked wrist and broken hand into the air and drove it directly into Len's nose. He felt an unreal pain travel to the capsule of his shoulder and return to his hand the currency of pins and needles.

Get up.

And again.

You just gonna lay there?

And again.

Show him a piece of yourself.

It was a voice that didn't belong, its feminine monotone echoing through the woods, booming and whisking past him on an easterly gust. With it, the distant cawing of a crow like a broken record.

"Show them a piece of yourself, honey."

Seymour turned around, the limp husk of Len Murphy slumped and limp. His hand was killing him to a point his whole arm felt paralyzed. But somehow, that didn't seem important. Because, by some miracle, his mother was there. The leather worn craters on her thirty-something face that told the story of bad health habits didn't do her kind demeanor justice, especially when her baby boy was hurt.

"Mama," he blubbered, dropping to both knees, showing her the break in his arm weakly. Tears threatened to eject themselves from ready ducts. But he tried to hold them in, just in case dad came to.

His mother took a step towards him, knelt down before him, and gently clasped the wrist. "What happened, Seymour? Are you okay?"

"Mama," his wanting voice said, shaking his head. He looked back at his father, who lay motionless in the weeds, which seemed to be growing by the second, swallowing his beaten body whole.

"Honey, it's okay," she said. ***"But you have to show them."***

"Show them what?" he asked with a nasally whine. His father's body was now lost completely in the expanding entanglement. Seymour himself backed up into his mother's cradling arms. His breathing was

labored. It wasn't real, he told himself. Thick vines wrapped around his ankles like restraints as he tried to take in a mother's peace. He closed his eyes and for a moment, tried to turn himself inward. But his ankles impacted together by root. He wriggled helplessly against it, but it bound him all the way up now. His body stiffened to fight.

"Show them how we hurt you. Show them how we hurt you. Show them how we hurt you. Show them *mmmMmmmMmm*" the voice distorted. Pale flesh melted and ran like a heavy coat of paint down the wall and left him in the empty jail cell of a human rib cage. The last bits to trickle away were his mother's cerulean eyes.

"You didn't hurt me, mommy. You *never* hurt me."

And then, the set of skeletal arms fell limp to the ground. The vines relinquished their tightening hold on his legs. Seymour went tumbling into a scattered pile of osseous material. Laying in her remains, pathetic, angry, alone. Screaming mad. Waiting for somebody to take him to the fucking doctor.

"Let go. Come on, Waylon. Knock it off right now. You know how this goes. They're going to fine you." The voice of the referee reorienting him to his surroundings, he opened his eyes.

The crowd roared their approval of what must have been a hard fought contest. Seymour's left hand was clamped down on the carcass of Chris Lawler, face bloodied, nose crooked. Unsure of exactly what had *actually* transpired in the dying moments of the match, he let go of the hold. And when he stood up to have his arm raised, he was convinced he could hear the cawing of a crow.