

Main

The Journey of L



If you found this diary, I would appreciate it if you either returned it or left it alone.

But one piece of advice: **don't you DARE read it.**

Friday, July 25th, 2003

Every day since *that* day has made it harder to recognize the man I used to be. None prepared me for this solemn word: **guilty**. Given *who* I've killed, I went in well aware of my chances for a merciful sentence. But hearing it hammered in so bluntly, as though the judge got rid of a thorn on her side...it's kind of a tough pill to swallow, y'know? Especially when you're in for life. And so the long ride towards my "new home", the Meriwether County Correctional Facility (MCCF from this point on), began. I thought wrapping my head around it all in peace wasn't too much to ask for, even being a murderer and all that. Well, I thought wrong. This old cop had someone of my...let's say "profile" in the back of his car. Yet he just had to say "well, I reckon you didn't do it, then" to bait my curiosity. Calling it a "conversation" wouldn't do justice to the storm of words that overwhelmed my request for silence. But I'd be lying if I blamed it all on the good fella: this was a nicer way to spend the ride to the end. Bonding over being Macon boys, asking about other people he drove to prison, narrowly avoiding an accident...okay, maybe not all of it was that great. Still, this might well be the last bit of good chat I'll get in a long time.

His MCCF cohorts weren't eager to prove me wrong. They wasted no time putting me through the intake. Identity check, strip search, delousing, body scan, mug shots, health evaluations. These moments took me back to the days I endured reporters. Except this time not even a single fiber of my being was left out, like they were studying an alien beast. For good measure, they required my clothing too. Even my watch wasn't spared. Right then, every nerve lit with the dark urge to fight these proceedings. What would that have accomplished, though? Fighting is what brought me here in the first place. They expected me to lash out as would a chained hound. I couldn't give them that, even as I gave them everything else. For my troubles, I got the orange jumpsuit and the honor to meet the charming warden, whose number one rule was "no blasphemy". The rest of the rules were left for me to figure out as he ordered the march into my temporary cell. But it was when those goddamn bars slammed home that the reality this cop distracted me from struck: it's for real. My whole life, crumbled to dust and blown away in the blink of an eye, leaving me with nothing. Nothing but all the time in the world to think about it...and a new name.

I am Inmate 307742.

Sunday, August 16th, 2003

Three weeks of paperwork and tests later, they were *finally* sure the nights alone with my thoughts didn't drive me too crazy for other prisoners. So I got tossed into my daily life. It started with sharing a massive, fenced yard with over a thousand prisoners and four snipers looking down on us, waiting for a slip-up with hawk-like attention. Naturally, I stuck with the most sensible approach I could think of in-between the regrets: *do NOT stand out*. Of course, the enthusiastic howling and clapping for the "new fishes!" dashed my hopes of avoiding the senior guests. It might soon be time for Plan B.

Monday, August 17th, 2003

A quick scan of the basketball game drew my attention towards a black inmate with a bird tattoo across his head, Dexter. The way he barked orders at the players told me right away that he's one of "top dogs". In a prison full of innocents, he's the self-admitted murderer of his wife and her lover. The way he just wore this sin on his sleeve is just unthinkable for me. ~~Even with the way she betrayed me.~~ At least, it meant most didn't find messing with this guy to be a good idea. Not everyone thought the same, though. In fact, half of his competition were of a different...demographic from the teams he played with. You know what, I'm just gonna call a spade a spade. It's **segregation** all over again. And it seems the guards neither enforced nor forbid it. Just goes to show, a simple change of scenery is enough to set us back centuries. And I played ball.

Tuesday, August 18th, 2003

Now, what could possibly drive me to retch more than myself at that moment? The food, of course! When I first went into that cramped cafeteria, I expected worthless, bland or disgusting junk. Today, I hit the jackpot and got all three at once. Could have sworn a living maggot snuck into my bread. The choice between eating that or going back to my dirty bed hungrier wouldn't make itself. But all the while I steeled my resolve to pretend it was my childhood M&C, the question "You really gonna eat that?" cut through the dilemma. The one who asked was Danny, a sarcastic though chatty hispanic guy standing by the table. "What if I do?" was my answer. Apparently, my "hard act" clashed with how obvious I made my disgust. So he offered me his insect-free bread in exchange for my brownie. A pity, but the offer had a time limit and I've never had much of a sweet tooth anyway. We made the deal, and he went back to his table just as fast. Later at my cell, the old bookkeeper Frank slipped me the uneaten brownie with a note that said something about "sticking together and protecting ourselves"...and a fucking razor blade!

Wednesday, August 19th, 2003

Spent all night thinking about the implications of yesterday and decided to just return all that stuff before an officer caught me with it. Unfortunately, it turns out my cellmate is a "fan" of Samuel North and not too happy with the way his life ended. Nor with me accepting a deal with Danny. Grew more aggravated when I started "talking white" with my "fancy education". It's obvious he simply found every excuse to get mad and expect compensation. Something he would have gotten with surprising ease, had he simply asked any of the inmates...willing and eager, let's just say that. Regardless of his motives, he would take "no" for a three-letter word. So, I tried something else. Having caught him with his pants down, ~~I reached for my pocket and made sure he wouldn't have the balls to try it again.~~ Fucking hell, what am I even writing?! I just did this to someone! On week one! And somehow they didn't find the razor. I hid it on my person, but they didn't even thoroughly search the cell. Pretty sure they didn't buy his story that he cut himself either. They...just don't care. And why would he cover for me? Where the hell am I?

Thursday, August 20th, 2003

Dear God. I've expected all day to see Danny come back to collect favors from me. The guards found him in the showers, his body pouring out blood through more holes than I could count. And I do mean **all** of his holes. This was a message, and I have the feeling I know which one: way I heard it, the guy was in for raping a minor. Now, I know rumors aren't really the most reliable source of intel, but my throat tightened nonetheless, like it was about to release bile. This was the guy who offered me his own piece of bread. When he said something about needing to look out for each other even in this place, was that what he meant? Saving me with that...thing so I'd save his ass? Him, another rapist fuck?! He must have been desperate if / was his best option!

His friendly smile feels like a mask now. How many more of these people are hiding insidious shit? I know how easy those guilty of this crime get off. How long would he have really spent here, compared to someone like me, so he could prey on somebody else? Something in my gut feels...vindicated. Is that why they did this? They get to judge?! The way society judges us?! What would that make me, after what I did yesterday? If Danny really did that shit

Fuck, I can't. I can't even write straight.

Saturday, September 20th, 2003

After the incident, I've obviously been transferred into another cell. An old, long-haired inmate with a thick beard, Axel, was already in there. I don't think I remember the last time we exchanged more than three words at a time. Not even for our silent agreement to stay out of each other's way. Which is perfectly fine by me. Somehow, I trust this guy even less than my old mate, and I could use the peace, brief as it is. I struggle to understand why I even wanted it, though. The daily banging and yelling to have us stand in the morning as they count their lambs. Dragging us back to our cells whether we finished eating or puking. Reverse the order of these two events for the evening. Add the loud announcements in-between for the cell times or yard time, catching the smell of disinfectant on the floors, looking over my shoulder only for nothing to happen. That's basically how it goes every day. Wish I could tell you that the flushing of toilets or the cries in the night weren't a regular thing too. And there's like a thousand of us. The math for privacy is pretty simple here. Yet, these events used to distract me, even if just for an instant. Now it's starting to be normal, and it'll be exactly like back at the beginning. Where my mind drifts to how things are going back at Macon. Not that they would be bothered to let me know. The letters I had been sent were from either concerned or angry students I have let down. And given the lack of reply, I'm guessing they either moved on or my letters were bounced. My money is on the former. Oh well. If this is what to expect for the rest of my days, as far as life sentences go, it could be worse.

Wednesday, December 10th, 2003

Three months, huh? Guess it's hard to keep track of the days when you're sent in "the hole". Found Justin in the act of reading my diary. Tried to blackmail me into doing what he said, lest he turned me into the laughingstock of the cellblock. I never found out what he wanted, for I didn't listen to another word. What I did instead was beat him within an inch of his life. He has been transferred into a minimum security prison, where he apparently spent the rest of his life eating his food from a straw. I thought he was full of shit when he said he was a white collar criminal who had no business being in the block. But the way he just laid there, took the blows, tearfully begging for help couldn't be mistaken: he was no fighter, let alone a killer. Made me wonder how many of them told the truth, like that guy with the glasses. Me? I spent three weeks in solitary. Got nothing but an occasional piece of bread and water to keep me alive. The only things I had for company were scratching on the walls, men breaking down as they're cut away from the little connections they had. That...that just got too close to home. I'm just gonna leave it at that.

Thursday, February 28th, 2008

Upon my release from the doghouse, Axel returned my diary and promised he didn't take a peek. Asked him how the hell he got it back, with the sole response being that all I needed to know is that I owed him now. This particular choice of word wasn't a pleasant blast to the past. Fortunately for me, he has used this opportunity to help me make sense out of this new world. Oh, and get a sucker to play poker with him. To my credit, I won more often these past few years. An optimistic man would tell you that this was no coincidence, since the incidents on my end cooled off. That was for the best. I needed to be on my best behavior to land a job that would keep my mind occupied. Preferably in a way fitting my background more than cleaning the putrid smelling foulness, also known as "prison bathrooms". To that end, there were a few rules I worked out: show respect, never borrow anything and never call anyone a "punk", "bitch" or (worst of all) "rat" lest I was itching for a fight. The politics of prison were quite straightforward. And I would like to tell you, my dear diary, that this made the process any easier. Unfortunately, prison life doesn't come without a few scars. Some were from the few inmates still willing to mess with the "Jewel killer", as they called me since my first cellmate. But the bulk of it, I owed to overzealous officers.

I believe the worst incident involved Frank attacking me with a knife he somehow smuggled in. I had to appeal to the little sense he had left for my life. The explanation wasn't good enough for the blue shirts, though. They stumbled upon the poor bastard being a crying mess and assumed I provoked him. Either that, or they just felt like sending someone to the infirmary with twenty-eight broken bones. And excluding the terrifyingly slow medical intervention, I am grateful for the nurse's professionalism. Despite me jerking away from her touch, feeling like a cornered snake. Like I said, this life comes with its fair share of scars.

Anyway, before leaving the prison, the dagger-happy pal, Frank, has apologized, offering me his winged companion. A crow named Gus, and he wore a red ribbon. Definitely a different deal from taking care of my pet fish, but at least I'd have someone to feed the insects in my meals. He also explained why he did this: the son of a gun was about to get out on parole. Used to hate these walls forty years ago, and now he can't go on without them. Would I end up like him, with enough time? The spine-shivering thought that my mind could pull me back in even if I got out keeps me awake. I still had fifteen years to go before even thinking about parole. Just shy of being sixty. And man, I feel old already.

Tuesday, June 24th, 2008

"Hard work hardly works", Axel said. Well, I finally got to tell him to shove off with that nonsense. It only took years of good behavior and Frank's departure to get there, but they finally took my background into consideration for my work assignment: becoming the guy in charge of the library. Few visited the dusty, rusty pile of books this room truly was (guess Frank wasn't into housekeeping), but a particular character showed up.

Lenny Winters. Came to MCCC two months earlier for a breaking and entering that ended in a man's death. The cliché of the young black punk: loud, cocky as hell, quick to temper. In other words, he fit right in. That is, if you stopped at the surface. As it turned out, he had left a parting gift to his girlfriend. Went straight to the books since, in an effort to graduate and reintegrate society as soon as he's free, and he came to me when he learned I used to be a teacher. When I warned him I'm not wasting time with lazy tourists, there was an unmistakable spark in his eye. Perhaps he thought of her on the streets, or his future child growing up without knowing her father. For the first time in half a decade, I had a student. After him came others, perhaps out of curiosity on what the Jewel Killer could possibly teach them. Some even had no intention of learning anything, just questioning if I believed myself superior to others. The reply has always been the same: "of course not. I landed myself here over a woman." Of the few who truly wanted to learn, I could catch grown men having the same enthusiasm as the young students I used to lecture about the Civil War and its meaning against slavery.

For the briefest of moments, we felt free.

Monday, January, 12th, 2009

The CO woke me up one night and broke the news: my mother has passed away. Of course, as a violent criminal, I didn't have the right to be present at the funeral. ~~Would she want me around?~~ Went back to the pod, containing everything. But try as I might, the whole block heard about my loss. Reckoned they would use that against me, thinking I was weak. Really couldn't give a fuck at that moment. All I cared about was the way I failed her. And soon, it will be my father's turn. If I wasn't stupid that one time...I should have been there. The next morning, Axel handed me a homemade condolence card, signed by every single inmate he knew. Some even offered me anonymous words of comfort. This time, I couldn't hold shit. There wasn't even anything left in me to fight against my cellmate's comforting hand. I just let it all go.

Tuesday, September 24th, 2013

Come to think of it, the next few years went well for me. Sure, there were some lockdowns, cellphone contraband busts and collective asswhoopings there and there. But at this point, it's Tuesday. Perhaps this is what had me worried. The time I trusted the calm has come and gone. And of course, life finds a way to prove me right in the worst way possible. Somehow, the guards made our five star treatments look like massages. Some poor bastards were sent to solitary for staring at them wrong. Others kept the nurses busier than usual. Quite a few of them were twitching. It started since one of the new guys went crazy and jumped Lenny, biting him *hard* on his arm. The rest of us are enduring a 24-hour lockdown. There's something bad going on. Not even a riot or the cellphone contraband had them this rattled.

The rumors and news about this "infection"...could this be related? Has it reached our country? Axel tried to keep me from panicking, but I could tell even he started to sweat. He was supposed to go back home today, and say hello to his old biker crew around a baseball game and beers in hand. And now we're trapped, dammit! Lenny is sick! All the while the situation was entirely in the hands of the guards. I didn't like it. Not one bit. But panicking and banging on my cell like everybody else wouldn't solve anything. All I can do right now is trust that my brother saw the news and looked after dad, if they're still alive. He's always been the one to support them since I left the family business. As for me...well, I was meant to die in that cell anyway.

Friday, September 27th, 2013

I...don't even know where to begin. These cowards left the MCCF en masse, going back to their families and friends while these...sick people got in. For some reason, whoever stayed let us out. If one could ask Lenny, he would have said one of the guards felt human enough not to let us starve to death. Axel and I knew they were really just using us to fight our way out...or failing that, as bait. And sure enough, as the two of us dashed to the garage, we saw almost everyone else get their faces chewed off. If they weren't getting disemboweled. Or...you know what, I'll stop. Just before we got to the exit, one of the officers held us at gunpoint while they slowly escaped. That is, at very least what they expected to do. Something must have possessed me, because against my better judgement, I waited for an opening and jumped the guard armed with a shotgun. The surviving inmates must have been just as insane, because they helped me kill the guard immediately after my initiative. With the key in hand, we got our separate buses with the help of Axel blasting the infected with the few shells left. Ran out of gas three hours later. We were far enough from harm, at least.

Saturday, September 28th, 2013

We're headed for Macon. Axel figured his boys were big boys. They could take care of themselves. I wasn't so sure about that. We ran into three of the prison's survivors, surrounding a young, former guard as one of them ordered the others to "get his pants off". Axel told me not to even think about saving him. Told me to remember how keen they were to leave us to die in their hellhole. "He's not worth getting yourself killed, you follow me?", he said. He was right. That guy probably deserved what was coming to him. So naturally I listened to my friend...for all of two seconds before attempting a one versus three. No point for guessing how that went for me. But it didn't matter, because this moment also allowed me to test his loyalty. No point for guessing how it went for them either. When the former guard moved to thank us, he followed it up by apologizing for the way we were treated. He went in knowing this was wrong, and wondered if there was any way he could ever repay us. We asked for a ride to Macon, no cuffs this time.

Brad, you and dad better be alive. You were always strong. ~~Even without me.~~

Sunday, September 29th, 2013

Fuck...fuck fuck fuck fuck! *Fuck!*

I...we got jumped by two bandits who wanted the car. Dealt with them easily. We must have made a lot of noise, though, because dozens of infected people followed us. To his credit, the blue shirt tried to help us. It wasn't enough. There was no time to get back in the car either. We dashed as far as our burning legs could carry us. I was fast enough to avoid any bite. The same couldn't be said for Axel. Barricaded ourselves into a small cabin with heavy boxes. Which means I was trapped with my bitten friend. I was sure there was a doctor. Something we could have done. Axel didn't think the same. Told me to just leave him. I couldn't do that. He stopped me from reaching for my gun, saying we'd make a ruckus. "Save the bullets for yourself. For someone you can save." Axel said. "Just go, man."

At that point, I stared at a nearby axe, and so did he. He winced, but he said nothing else. Nothing but this: "Until you see a twitch...would you stay with me? It's...kinda scary to die, you follow me?"

I did follow him. We sat together, until the time came.

What's the point of keeping track of the days? They all look the same. Most days were just watching. Looking over my shoulder. Infected and non-infected trying to kill me. Killing them instead. Tracking down food. The scent of meat led me to a couple cooking deer. I was reaching for my gun before realizing the woman was sitting for two. Was. Another guy had the same idea, except he followed through. Killed him. Buried the poor couple with a shovel nearby. Figured they'd want to be together. They didn't need the food anymore, but the deer sure had a bitter taste to it.

I came across a curious hat. Seemed like a baseball type with a large "D" at its center. I'm sure Axel would have recognized the team. A young woman pulled up on me with a gun at her side. Had a keen interest in getting it back. Of course I returned it. She stared at me for a few seconds, then mouthed a quiet thank you. As we went our separate ways, I peered at the "UGA" symbol on the back of her jacket. All the times I've been called "Teacher" rushed back into my head. Even Lenny ended up calling me that, in his last lesson. It wasn't one he needed. It was simply a celebration for his graduation. And...I'm just torturing myself, aren't I? We were lucky enough to survive this prison. I couldn't look for him...

How long has it been since my last entry? Years, definitely. Years since I...am I free? I remember how it felt to get out of these walls. All it meant. All it didn't. No more limited yard time to deprive me of the soft, humid grass. It should have been absurd of me to appreciate nature when it's at the very heart of the disaster. The very thing that freed me. This doesn't make any sense. But I couldn't deny the view of the outside, though: it's beautiful. Overwhelming. Sometimes, only sometimes, a part of me misses these walls. Axel would tell me I'm crazy to even think, let alone write this down. MCCF was *hell*. And yet, this was my home. Where everything made sense. Back there, I knew where the lines were drawn. Which ones not to cross. Sometimes I was still waiting for a guard to grant me permission to piss. Because I killed a man.

Now? I kill even more...I live. They were "hostiles" or "infected" to make it easier on myself, but I have seen two infected who weren't "patrolling". They just stood there. Weeping. Head in hands and all. They were...people. They all had hopes for the future. Like Lenny. And I abandoned him to find those who shunned me. Yet I wish I didn't find them. I...don't think I can do this. Not anymore.

Went back and forth between travelling outside and going into QZs. Five years ago, I settled for a QZ in Hartford. Unsurprisingly, it's just as bad as the rest were. The military hoarding all the resources. The excessive violence. Controlling what we said. Told us what job to do. Which of course usually involved sewer maintenance for the highest pay. The smuggling. The rising tensions of a resentful population. Just like every other QZ, this was nothing but a prison. One with comfier beds and no bars, but it is a prison nonetheless. One that trained children to become soldiers. Still I fell for the same brickwall, like I was expecting a different outcome. Because I did try the outside once. And the harder I tried, the more damage I did. Besides, my body isn't quite as strong as it used to. Thank the diet of rats for that. Runners would eat me alive as I am now, and that's if I'm lucky. But I'm not really living, am I? The recent public hanging of Michael and Kathleen Coghlan was especially cruel. The last straw on the general population, actually. Is that all I can aspire to for the last of my days? Is there truly not something out there? Anything besides being a cowardly prisoner or a killer without a cause? Any hope?

Now that I mention it, there were rumors of a place in Wyoming. Apparently, this big community had walls, had power through hydroelectricity and grew their own food. I thought exactly what one would expect: what a steaming load of bullshit! But there was this voice nagging me, **nagging me**: "What if it was true?". I had to think about it.

Well, it appears my longing for something else was answered. Just in a completely different form than I expected. Or wanted. Be careful what you wish for, I suppose. Rebels overthrew the military and lynched soldiers at the drop of a hat.

What did it mean for me? Well, I obviously couldn't stay here. It's gonna be a bloodbath. Soldiers abandoning the QZ and leaving it vulnerable to the infected. Only a matter of time before the people realize the cost of freedom and look for someone to blame. I'd rather not have these fingers be pointed at me. It seems others felt the same way. I listened to a group of survivors' plans for leaving and subtly requested to join them. Few seemed enthusiastic to allow an old man to slow them down. To which I said: "Well, if it comes to that, the infected will come for me first!"

They liked me immediately.

On my end, I had a keen interest in Henry. Ever since I could remember, he had always been alone with his brother Sam. Through all these years in this world, they stuck together. It takes a lot to keep such a bond, despite the circumstances. I wondered what he must have had to do to make it happen. Especially when the plan involved going to the Fireflies somewhere west. Joining a terrorist group probably couldn't be a good option when accounting for the safety of a little boy. Then again, where was it safe?

After our escape, we made our first campfire where each of us asked ourselves questions. I was the first they asked. One of the standout questions came from the leader, Mark. "What's up with your tattoo?" Having usually worn long-sleeved clothes, I'm still unsure how he knew that detail, much less remembered it. Guess I stood out somehow. And so, I told them about the prison tattoo my friends inked on my left arm: a phoenix. Has faded quite a bit, and it looks pretty damn ugly. And yet, it endures.

Soon came Henry's turn to tell us about himself. After ensuring Sam was sleeping, he told us he was a rat. He made a deal with an old FEDRA administrator he described to have a mean look on her face. But she acted on her promise to provide the medicine for Sam, for she lost her old man to a heart attack. I spent a night or two hating this guy's guts. Kathleen and Michael's deaths...it was his fault. It is such a perfectly understandable thing for him to do. So why can't I look past the fact he ratted his own friends out? What if he were to decide I was a liability for Sam's safety? Can I even trust him?

The time to decide came sooner than I wanted, or expected. Henry pointed at a seemingly stable bridge leading to a junkyard on the other side. Since his leader shot him down and everyone else listens to him without question, he figured he'd try his luck with the new, prison guy. Most likely to help and the least likely to rat him out. Clever. What wasn't so clever is that the bridge did start to collapse soon after he crossed. With only a few seconds to decide, I risked pulling him back.

"You saved my life." Henry said, as though he didn't expect it.

"...Of course I did. We gotta stick together and protect ourselves, right?"

As Mark was scolding Henry on being reckless, I went to Sam, who was sitting by himself. At first reluctant to tell me what was on his mind, he asked me:

"Do you think we can truly find something out there? I mean...you were outside a long time, right? What was it like? How did you survive?"

Survive. The boy made a lot of assumptions, that's for sure. But I tried to be as genuine as possible to his genuine question.

"Luck, I suppose. I remember how things were like right after it all started. Everyone believed it would be over in a few weeks. Someone would stop it, save the day. A doctor would find the cure. Soldiers would protect us. Someone always saved the day. They...did not. Now, there's more infected than people. And there are more people trying to kill us than help us."

"I thought so..." Despite being dejected, I could tell in his tone he truly didn't believe in the optimism his brother encouraged so often.

"Still worth looking for good people, though. And being good too."

"But...why, if it doesn't mean you'll live?"

"A decent man attracts decent people." I said. "Friends he can count on. A crook...well, he can only count on other crooks. And who would you rather have on your side?"

"I guess. But it's gotta be hard to make the difference, right?"

"Sure. You can fool some of the people all of the time. Or even all of the people some of the time. But fooling all of the people all of the time? That's not happening."

He didn't offer any other reply, but judging by the brief, but present ghost of a smile on his face, he seemed to feel a little better. Yet I am not sure how much I believe in what I said. After all I've seen, all I've *done*, what even counts as a "decent man" these days? Still, perhaps I'm starting to understand why Henry felt pushed to betray his friends. So I asked Sam "where's your gun?". His reply confirmed what I've suspected.

For that stretch, I think I'll just record word for word (or as accurately as I can) what Henry and I told each other, see where I went wrong.

"You wanted to talk?" Henry asked.

"Yes. Look, if you keep on like this, your brother is not gonna make it." Off to a good start.

Upon hearing my sentence, Henry gripped me by the collar and slammed me against a wall. "Say that again, old man. I dare you."

"Well, now we're both scared."

"Scared?! What do you know?"

"I'll tell you, as long as you kick my ass after I'm done talking." I said. "I know you don't know where the fireflies are. You'll have to run around the country in hopes of finding them. I know you know how dangerous this world is. And it scares you, for the little brother. Your fear is what makes you want to protect him so hard."

Through the aggression, I could swear I spotted his eyes soften one iota. Perhaps I let a bit too much show. "Now. I want you to consider what would happen if you were to..."

"I won't." Henry's retort almost sounded like a plea.

"Well, you're certainly not some fragile old man. Even so, it doesn't hurt for him to learn how to take care of himself, should you be...occupied while running or hiding prove not to be enough. Like with a gun, for instance."

"Are you kidding me?! He's—"

"A child? The infected won't care about his age while ripping him apart. And don't even get me started on what bandits would do to him..."

"Keep it up..."

"Shit, perhaps it came out harsher than I wanted it to be..."

"You think?!"

"The point is, as much as you want to spare his innocence, there's a reality you'll eventually need to face: you won't always be around to protect him. Hopefully you won't have to find that out when you're attacked by a runner you didn't spot. Or a bullet you couldn't dodge. Where reason fails, a gun is more often than not what keeps you alive. I'm sure you must have learned that from a young age."

"Yes, from FEDRA. My brother won't be some soldier."

"Nobody is asking him to. But Sam is smarter than you think. Let him prove it to you. Let him help where he can."

"...Let's say I decide that part of what you say makes sense. What's in it for you?"

"I don't mean to tell you how to do your job, but I've seen this happen too many times. Good people, friends, families...all torn apart by loss. I guess...I just don't want to see another kid die. Nor do I want to see what you would do if you blamed yourself for it."

After a few seconds of staring into my eyes, Henry released me. "Thanks for the concern, Professor. But Sam is under my care. You know nothing about what we went through together, and we'll continue to be fine without you."

"...The day will come when you won't be."

Without saying another word, he walked away, telling Sam to follow him.

Well, that could have gone better.

One of the worst parts about pushing seventy? Watching youth make the exact same mistakes you made, knowing there's absolutely nothing you can say or do to make them change their minds. Nothing, besides warning them of the risks, letting them spread their wings and hope they will get back up from the crash. Henry and Sam have decided to follow Mark and the others to get into another city, in hopes of finding supplies for their journey. While he expected me to try and convince him not to go, I merely wished him luck. And whispered my plans in his ear. At first he looked at me like I was a sad, senile old man. That was closer to the truth than I wanted to admit. But then, he traded that pity for some serious consideration.

"Watch yourself, old man." Henry said.

"It goes double for you." I said.

And just like that, the fleeting moments we had came and went. This is what it means to be free even if it means they may have to suffer being caged for a while. All I can do is hope they will be luckier than...I needed to move on. So I did, after stroking the red ribbon for good luck.

Wellington, Ohio. I caught two rabbits yesterday. Could have had more if I had a better aim. I know Axel was looking down, being like "I dunno how the hell you could miss those easy shots, you follow me?". On second thought, maybe he'd just be happy I tried. Next time, I could use some Mac & Cheese for my troubles. Hope you're happy where you are, mom.

Henderson County, Tennessee. Reached an abandoned hardware store. Took a few breaks. Okay, *more* than a few. But man, this time I took a *long* one. I dunno what possessed me to put my old bones through this. Right. Hope. Because it didn't burn me before. I...for what it's worth, I forgive you, Samantha. It's been the case a long time ago. I just didn't have the balls to write it down. Who would have thought a resentful marriage is corrosive? Hopefully you forgave me too, for your sake. If you're still alive, that is.

Lincoln, Nebraska. Three hunters were looking for me. It took an hour, but they finally gave up. Lucky me! My knees couldn't take much longer. Really could have used my father's cane. For a well-placed whack in their thick skulls. My red ribbon was nowhere to be found because of them. Well, guess I'll have to make my own luck now. Sorry I couldn't keep the watch either, dad.

Jackson, Missouri Wyoming. It took an immense amount of willpower to scratch out where The First Battle of Independence took place. Alas, mine takes place elsewhere. I have finally reached the county. Which meant the town was somewhere around god knows how many square miles. Piece of cake! I'm gonna need to channel some more of Lenny's exaggerated confidence and Brad's suicidal courage. If my kid brother had the nerve to jump on the back of a truck to teach some boys a lesson in respect, then I have no right to give up. Not when I'm so close.

Well, it seems my luck just ran out. Two bullets. A few days worth of food. And my guts. Against a runner who spotted me from afar. Thank goodness for the massive headstart. Allowed me to barricade a house with a box. Didn't feel good for my back, but it did buy me some time to get upstairs and write one, last time.

So close, and this is where I get sloppy. And now, my story is about to come to a close. I expected to be panicking more than I was. Long overdue, I suppose. Death was a risk I have known ever since I first stepped in the MCCF. By all rights, I should have died there.

If anything, it's sobering. I look back at my life, and all I see is a list of failures. Couldn't function in a community, nor without. Couldn't even leave anything behind. No shape. Not even a family. Definitely an obscure tale. So many unfulfilled ambitions, so little time to fix any of it. Yet, I am ready to go. Absurd, isn't it? Well, it might not be a complete failure after all. I have reached the comfiest bed I've found in three decades. So far away from home at my old age.

That one crack sounded more urgent. It will come upstairs. Alongside whoever and whatever it has attracted.

Well, it was about time I put the pen down anyway.

Tuesday, November 20th, 2033

Good news: I didn't die. Yet. Bad news: I'll probably be too busy lecturing our future to write my thoughts on that old thing again. How?

If my brain isn't failing me yet, I said something like "Took you long enough." Henry and Sam showed up in the nick of time to save me, as a team. With solid back-up too: Ellie, a pretty good-hearted kid, if a little crude with her elders. I can't remember the last time I've been called a "fossil" to my face. But she saved my life, so I'll put up with it. For a little while. And then, there was Joel. We didn't exchange more than a few words. From what I've been told, he's a bit of a hardass to everyone at first. I'm not the man to judge him. Especially when I'm to blame for the surprise rescue mission. When the four of them found Jackson first despite my headstart, Sam was worried I had died and convinced his brother to look for me. Ellie snuck out, which meant Joel had to come too. Still, he remained nice enough to invite me to the community of his brother Tommy. Or more accurately, of his brother's wife, Maria.

She put me through a *lengthy* background check that I half-expected to include mug shots or strip searches. Naturally, I stuck with the most sensible approach I could think of in-between the regrets: I told her **everything** I've been through since I was on my way to prison. Everything that I have done. The teacher who taught at UGA and killed a man for sleeping with his wife. The inmate who castrated a prisoner and helped another graduate. The man who left a friend to turn and ensured another died a man. The good, the bad, the ugly, this is all me. And I would be damned if I fooled anyone into thinking otherwise. Least of all, myself. Maria, with the warmest of smiles, responded to the baring of my soul:

"Well, Lee Everett. Welcome to Jackson!"

Hearing this sentence put so bluntly pulled my aging nerves in so many directions, I could barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's the kind of thing only a truly free man can feel. A man released from a journey plagued by uncertainties and self-damnation, yet fueled by hope. To make it to the other side of the fence. To meet my friends and hug them. To watch Jackson's lights shine as bright as they said.

And now, for the first time in thirty years, I'm home.