



Final Notice

“I leave for basic training tomorrow,” said an eighteen year old Seymour, standing outside the dilapidated trailer park home of Leonard Murphy. “After that, Texas for six months, then wherever they decide to station me.”

The inhabitant of the oxidized tin box, his father, stood in the doorway in a coffee stained wife beater, his freshly lit cigarette a mile long hanging out of his mouth. His natural state. He stared down at his son three steps up with what was considered by Seymour to be a fitting position for the way he felt about his father. Always floating over him like a ghost he couldn’t escape. One that would summarily leave its haunt and follow him wherever he went.

Seymour thought of this visit as purely informative. There was no emotion behind the data shared. It was completely sterile. And Len, never one to be outdone, received the information like it had absolutely no impact. Unblinking, the same way he’d been when a judge ordered him to surrender a percentage of his workman’s comp claim to make a dent in his outstanding child support debt.

Len leaned on the casing of the door, took a drag of his cigarette, and exhaled. He broke eye contact to itch his balls, then briefly surveyed the kingdom he’d built for himself. A muddy courtyard square and an elephant graveyard of project cars that didn’t pan out in the drive. Then, he looked back down to his son.

“You wanna come in?” His flat inflection was less question than it was command. And besides, before Seymour could answer with a decisive *I can’t*, he had already disappeared around the corner into the dim lighting of Iowan poverty. The little pocket of existence he earned for himself. It was a standard Len move. One that his son felt bound to honor for reasons largely unknown to him.

Upon entry, Seymour was unsurprised yet somehow still struck by how heavy the air was heavy with Len’s habit. He hadn’t been exposed to cigarette smoke in over a year, which was the last time he visited his father. Floating toxic particles stung his lung sacs, provoking an involuntary cough. Len took a seat at

the kitchen table — a scarred and chipped wooden circle with a termite mound of cigarette butts at the center.

“Want one?” He asked, extending a wrinkled pack of cigarettes towards him, its plastic jacket carrying some moisture underneath, some evidence that it may have been left out in the Iowa rain the night before. Perhaps even evidence that his father had passed out on his walk home from the bar. A Leonard Murphy special.

“No,” replied Seymour, waving his hand, not looking up. Len shrugged and gave them an effortless toss onto the table.

“Leaving before you even graduate high school,” said Len, placing his cigarette at the crest of his overflowing white mountain. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Your mom didn’t finish high school and your pa didn’t finish, neither,” he said, unironically using textbook bad grammar. “Runs in the family.”

“I graduated last Friday,” said Seymour, unphased. “We sent you an invitation.”

Seymour took note of a growing pile of envelopes on the countertop and nervously gulped. His father had always cursed mail couriers like they were trying to deliver him death. It was an unhealthy aversion that traveled down the genetic pipeline into Seymour’s own coding. He didn’t even need to hear his father say it before his words came out.

“Little behind on that,” he said, calmly picking up his cigarette. The only thing that gave away his nerves on the matter was his elongated drag. A single piece of mail that tumbled off of the top like a flake from a dandruff dusting rested against the rounded ridge of the counter. He could see the words in big threatening red letters in the middle of the envelope: **FINAL NOTICE**.

“Yeah, well, I did make it through,” said Seymour, doing his best to avoid a burgeoning nervousness about mail that wasn’t even addressed to him. “So there’s that, I guess.”

Len gave a prideless nod. “Guess college was too much to ask.”

“College was never in the cards for me,” responded Seymour drily, eyes down towards the table. He felt like it was a statement that didn’t really require any further elaboration.

“Been a while since I’ve seen you,” admitted Len, dryly deflecting the unfortunate circumstances he’d left for his son as a pathway. “And when I *do* see you, it’s to tell me you’re going into the armed forces. Couldn’t have called when this started, for chrissake?”

Seymour paused. “You didn’t call, either.”

“You’re missing the point, son,” he responded. “You’re the one making the big decision. You coulda asked what I thought, at least.”

No graduation ceremonies attended, no birthdays remembered, and yet *somehow* the expectation remained his counsel was sought. It grated on Seymour that this man who was so eager to be paid homage

to had failed to grasp that it wasn't his absence as a man that pushed Seymour headlong into the United States Army. It was what he'd seen from him while he was an active part of his life.

He thought that if ever there was a time to tell him the simple truth of this, it would've been the day before he left. He wouldn't have had to deal with the fallout of his mother chiding him for his words when Len inevitably would call Pam to complain. Instead, all that came out was a soft, "Sorry."

"Well?" Poked Len, twin jet trails of smoke billowing out of his nostrils.

Seymour shrugged. He knew what Len wanted. One last opportunity for a parting shot. His childhood was littered with subtle digs from his father regarding his compulsive exercise habits being a cover-up for something he was hiding deep down. Opinions that he was, quoted directly, a *girl* who was so conscious of her weight that she measured out everything she ate to the gram.

"Where's Monica?" Seymour asked in his inherited avoidant cadence, noting a stack of crusted over dishes in the sink that represented only the tip of that particular iceberg.

Seymour could feel Len's stare land on him even though his own eyes were locked on a divot in the table. The moment his father wasn't prepared with an answer, he already knew the entire story. He'd seen it twice already.

"We're in touch," answered Len, finally.

"What does that mean?" Seymour asked, though he already knew what it meant. The same thing it meant when Pam used to call Len after their split. That she'd call to check on him, and he wouldn't answer. It was a phenomenon young Seymour Murphy could not wrap his mind around. Why his mother cared after they broke up, and why he never picked up the phone.

Seymour briefly looked up towards his father. His eyes, like Seymour's, were downcast. It was only for a split second, but it was there. A thousand yard stare into the cold oblivion of another lump sum alimony payout. A crumb of sorrow. Not regret, but regret adjacent. But as quickly as it was noticed, it was wiped away by the last drag from his dying cigarette. Len calmly extracted another from the pack and used the embers to bring life to a fresh cigarette, its white paper speckled with suspicion confirming gray spots from raindrops.

"Means what it means," he finally responded, tersely. Seymour knew enough not to press on the matter any further. "Anyway. Looks like you got ready to run your ass off."

"I did," said the son. At eighteen years old, Seymour was not only prepared to run, but he was ready to meet any physical expectation he'd encounter. He had done mock rucks over the Iowa hills and enough pull ups to induce vomiting.

"So?" Len took an abbreviated puff. "What's this all about, Seymour?" His tone suggested personal insult.

"What's *what* about?" Seymour tried to avoid nervously swallowing his saliva, but he failed.

“Don’t play stupid with me, kid. What is it you’re trying to prove by taking off and joining the armed forces in the middle of a goddamn conflict?”

“Prove? Nothing,” lied Seymour. “I’m just trying to do something to put me ahead, I guess.”

“*Mmm*,” grunted Len, blowing his smog straight up into the air, “and nothing else appealed to you other than what’s gonna amount to be a lot of time in the Middle East.”

It was a good point. And his statement had an appropriate rebuttal. He just wasn’t sure this was the time for unabashed truth.

“I had to do something,” answered the son, finding a shred of every. “This gives me what I need to succeed. And it’s what my plan has always been.”

Len cruelly chuckled at the thought. “*Succeed*,” he said, almost mockingly. “I know a thing or two, kid, because I’ve already played this story out. This ain’t got nothing to do with success. And it damn sure ain’t what anybody in their right mind would want. No, no, no,” he dragged his cigarette and shook his head, “this is something else. In fact, it comes from a place of hatred. Doesn’t it?”

“No,” answered Seymour before he really even considered the weight of the question.

“I was in for a year myself,” Len reminded his son. “And I ain’t learned nothing from serving this country. Had to learn it myself. All I know from it is resentment is the most powerful mind control drug on the market.”

“I don’t have resentment,” Seymour carried on with his half-truth.

“If you ain’t got any resentment towards me, son, you’re either ain’t got no balls, or you’re a fuckin’ *saint*.” His last word was so vitriolic that some spittle launched out from between his teeth and struck Seymour under the eye. “And you ain’t been blessed by the Pope I’ll assume the latter.”

“I said I don’t have any resentment towards you,” replied Seymour, nervously feeling his heart rate elevate and his mouth dry up. “Drop it, dad. *Please*.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” laughed Len, “just admit it and stop being such a damned weenie. Almost everything I done in my life came to me because of things I felt about your grandfather. Shit he said. His little criticisms of me. And we both know I ain’t been around half as much as he was. There’s something in there.”

“No,” said Seymour, trying to stand firm, “I really just came to say goodbye. Seriously.”

“No you didn’t,” escalated Len, “you came to say *fuck you*. And now that you’re here, you can’t say it. And that’s a shame, son, because that’s exactly the kinda mentality that’s gonna see you sent home to your weeping ma in a wooden box.”

“You’re *wrong*,” defended Seymour emphatically, “I only came here because mom said I needed to.” That was the truth. As far as why she felt that way, that was something he wouldn’t understand until years after he returned home on a permanent basis.

“And so you got into a beat up two door Ford and drove your ass thirty miles to my place? Coulda gone years without even knowing you was gone, son. And that’s just the hard truth. You wanna know something else?”

Seymour shook his head, looking down. He hated, above all things, to be pressed by his father.

“If you’d asked me before you made this decision of yours, I woulda told you to do it only if you had a death wish. You ain’t cut out for it. You’ll never be a soldier. I don’t care how fit and strong you think you are now, son, you just ain’t.”

This, coming from a man who dreamed of being a great wrestler, but never had the discipline to make it out of small town bingo hall.

“Not in this world. Not in any world.”

This, coming from a man who faked an eye injury at a toothpick plant to gain unemployment.

“The real bitch of it? *I’m* the only guy who’s gonna tell ya that you ain’t got the chops. You hate my guts, and I’m the best fuckin’ friend you’ve got.”

This, coming from a man who barely made it a year into his *own* military service before he received a discharge of questionable honor.

“If I was you, I’d maybe take that resentment you keep denying and put it towards something that might help you. Because at the end of the day, son, and maybe this’ll comfort you, but you *ain’t* me.”

Sitting at the table, his heart racing, equal parts angry and anxious at the dressing down he’d received from a man who didn’t believe in him enough to at least pretend to wish him well, he paused his breathing and closed his eyes. Trying to suppress the bubbling he felt in his pit at the myriad of insults. The autopsy of Seymour performed by a mortician that couldn’t even pay his own electric bill.

“You ain’t tough like me,” croaked Len, standing up, raising his ashen voice. “You ain’t got my spine!”

It wasn’t a voluntary reaction. Not that he felt bad for flipping the table, but it wasn’t something he would have done ordinarily. Cigarette butts like snowflakes floated through the air almost in slow motion as Seymour’s ledge of the table made solid contact with Len. There was no root that would’ve kept him upright. He tumbled down with the airborne furniture, the upside of the table landing on him hard. The impact of his weight hitting the floor stirred the *clangs* of loose beer bottles. A plate slid off the top of the dish mountain and rang into the base of the sink with a shatter.

And yet somehow, though the table was on top of him, he somehow managed to maintain control of his cigarette, perfectly in hand. Littered white butts settled on his chest and shoulders. He grimaced, groaned, and then laughed, his back sandwiched between the table and wall, and raised his cigarette to a set of arsenic toasted lips.

It was a memory that had been provoked by the glowing orange firefly of Gio's own lit cigarette. Seymour watched him across the hall and into the designated smoking area. Taking pensive drags and conversing with James Evans, who stood coolly with a glass of scotch in hand.

It was only the hand of William Heaven patting his shoulder that broke it. Seymour glanced over, then back towards Gio and James. Legion's head rolled off of his calf, followed by a single paw reaching over his leg like a grappling hook.

"We won a great victory tonight," said William, speaking loudly over the German chatter. He carried a glass of celebratory red wine with him. In front of Seymour, a glass of water. "No use in sulking over here on your own, is there?"

"We did," answered Seymour decisively and without enthusiasm, making eye contact with Legion's flickering dewy eyes. "But I'm not sulking. I'm just taking it all in."

"What do you mean by that, son?" William asked after a small sip of his wine, taking a seat on the stool next to him. "A win is a win. An important one at that. This is but a small step in a greater staircase. You've been around long enough to know wars are won in increments."

"It isn't that," he said, leaning towards William to ensure his voice was audible. "It's how I got here that I'm trying to understand."

"Ah," smiled William, further patting him on the shoulder. "Ruminating on the journey as a whole. Well, sometimes that can be a good thing. Kind of puts things into perspective sometimes."

Seymour shook his head, then tilted his head towards Legion, a gesture meant to put him at ease to remove himself from his position on his hind legs. But he didn't budge. He flopped his head down on Seymour's leg, holding firm.

"Doesn't make sense," said Seymour, keeping one eye through clumps of German beer hall patrons and into the smoking area on Gio and James. "That's all."

"Your journey isn't any more absurd than either one of theirs," claimed William, gesturing towards his teammates. "Just feels that way because it's yours and it's unique to you."

"Before I left home for the military, my dad made it a point to tell me that he was certain I'd be killed," Seymour felt compelled to confess. "Made it very clear that I wasn't him only because I wasn't the man that *he* was. I lost my head a little bit that day."

"From what little I know of your father, it sounds like whatever you did to him that day was on *him*," assured the manager.

"It's not what I did to him that day," replied Seymour after a sip of his water. "It's what I try to do to him every day. The only thing that man ever loved was professional wrestling. He tried his hand at it, but it wasn't his style. Took too much work for him."

“So where your father deserved an immediate pummeling, *you* opted for the longer death. You plunged the knife, then you twist it a little more every single day.”

Seymour nodded. “You could say that. Haven’t seen the man since that day. Never made it home to my mother’s funeral. I haven’t been back there since.”

“A prophet will never be welcomed in his hometown, son,” mused William, placing his wineglass on the glossy top of the bar. “You *are* going to need to go back there at some point. You haven’t said a proper goodbye to your mother, and even though he’s a bastard, you need to see your father. But I wouldn’t expect much change.”

“The last time we talked, he alluded to knowing that I was under the mask of Waylon Creek. You know what emotion I picked up on from the other end of the phone?” Seymour exhaled. “Pride. He’s *proud* of me, William. A decade after I left home, this man who I was so eager to kill with success he said I couldn’t have, won’t even let me have that small victory. It’s him twisting the knife, and it’s me under it.”

“That man has never had you under a knife or thumb unless you’ve allowed yourself to be put there,” said William, firmly. “That’s the truth I choose to believe in. And I believe that, my young friend, because I’ve seen you in action. I’ve seen all that impossible rage boiling underneath your surface the same way I’ve seen it boil in a hundred others that have a similar story to yours, and do you know what the difference is?”

“No.”

“You have the formula to turn that into an imposing of your will and supreme focus. Those men, *our* men,” said William of Aries and Evans, “need you to take that to the next step. And in doing so, you’ll be able to find the peace *you* need to bury your father for good.”

There was a peculiar warmth in the nest of the serpent. Not that Seymour could’ve interpreted William’s guidance as the words of a snake if he wanted to. But the poison spilled into his ear was such that its trace levels of toxin couldn’t have been picked up until it was too late.

And Legion whimpered with the silent suspicion that it already *was*.

“And what’s that?” Seymour’s curiosity at how this man had taken a foothold was only veiled by his desire to make sure he abided by his ultimate plan for Supreme Championship Wrestling.

“They need you to lead *with* them,” hissed William. “Each one of those men is primed to lead in their own right. Giovanni Aries has brought this company to its knees before. James Evans has held the World Title at gunpoint. He is so key to what we’re going to do that it’s almost impossible without his contribution.”

That was a statement that took Seymour by surprise. James’ influence was, for one reason or another, important to him. But it also stoked the fires of jealousy in Seymour’s furnace.

“If he’s the key, then maybe this is a conversation you should have with him,” said Seymour, taking a single hand and landing it atop Legion’s head.

“We’ve tried unlocking the door already, Seymour. Nicely and several times over, asked and answered with dismissal upon dismissal. When conventional means fail to move the deadbolt,” exhaled William with an assuring nod, “you need to use something else.”

“Which is?” He was all ears.

“A battering ram,” smiled William from ear to ear. “I’ve got to go tend to Billy for the night. That damn boy has so many muscle relaxers aboard he doesn’t know which end is up. For tonight, I need you to go join your unit. Enjoy the win. But get with the team. Because this week, that door is going to come right off the hinges.”

Seymour had no idea what any of that meant. A plan was obviously in place that he had no understanding of whatsoever. But it wasn’t his place to question. William had only ever done right by him, and when he joined the Fall of Man in the smoking room Giovanni Aries had claimed as his perch, he felt confident that things were going to change in a big way. His charges in Colorado still pending and all.