

A Great Enlightenment

Leroy Troutman, 28 years ago, was born and raised in a single wide trailer in the Apple Orchard Trailer Park, which despite the name, contained no apples, no orchards, and no parks. What the trailer park did offer was — relative to population of the rest of the county — a 17% higher probability of teenage pregnancy, a 31% higher probability of arrest, a 37% higher probability of substance abuse, and a 19% lower probability of receiving a high school diploma. These statistics were not advertised to potential residents.

Leroy was the third of five children. He grew up in similar fashion with his peers across rural Southern Appalachia who were born into poverty. He was what was known by the more liberal educators in the school system as a *product of his environment* during his early years of childhood mischief, tom foolery, and truancy — though with age, this label was abandoned for one of a nuisance, a menace, and a lost cause.

“He was a problem child, there’s no way around that,” stated for the record Ms. Kirkpatrick, “We all knew where he came from, where he was raised, so we didn’t blame him for the way he was. But some of us, myself included, did think that maybe we could save him from himself. Give him the best of a bad situation. He didn’t much take to any of that. By the time he

reached middle school, we had all but completely given up. At that point, we just tried to minimize how much he distracted the other students.”

Leroy smoked his first cigarette when he was 3 years old, drank his first beer when he was 5 years old, smoked his first joint when he was 8 years old, and before his 14th birthday had tried just about every other substance available to him. He dropped out of high school the day he turned 16 and impregnated his first baby mama shortly after.

Over the next 12 years, he struggled to hold down a job, bouncing aimlessly from one to the other — a cycle that applied equally to his romantic relationships.

“The saying around town,” said Tommy Hadrins, a former coworker from Leroy’s brief stint at the lumber mill, “is that Leroy’s got 9 babies by 10 baby mamas.”

In actuality, Leroy did have 9 children, ranging from ages 1 to 11, each with a different woman. At his best, he provided the bare minimum for his ex-lovers and children, and his best didn’t rear its head too often. More often, he neglected to pay child support, visit, or return phone calls.

His hobbies included drinking and driving, calling out of work to get high, and good old fashioned barroom brawls. He took advantage of any opportunity he saw that would get him even marginally ahead, with no thought to the well-being of others. He was interested in his own satisfaction and very little else. Leroy was living his best life at the expense of everyone around him.

His parents, with ample shortcomings of their own, did love and care for their son, though they tried to do it in strides and away from their home, given Leroy’s proclivity for kleptomania. His siblings felt the same way: whenever an olive branch was extended, it was quickly withdrawn and the decision regretted. His baby mamas viewed him with varying degrees

of contempt, roughly correlated with how long they had known him. They kept him in their life purely out of necessity. Any friends he had that were worth anything had largely moved on, leaving only the fair-weather variety that would stick by his side so long as he had money — or dope — in his pocket.

On a chilly night in March, Leroy finished his shift at the dollar store, a job he had held for the previous 7 weeks. He clocked out on the computer, grabbed the full bag of trash that sat by the door, and exited to the back of the building with the dumpsters and employee parking.

Gina leaned against the wall next to a grimy ash tray, smoking a Marlboro and scrolling on her phone.

“What you doing tonight, Leroy?” she asked as Leroy tossed the trash bag over the concrete tomb housing the dumpster.

She was a new hire, fresh out of high school, with greasy black hair and a nose ring. Leroy had her on his radar.

“Heading out to the Willys,” he said. “Wanna meet me for a drink when you get off?”

“You know I’m not old enough to get in there.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” he said as he straddled his motorcycle. “I basically own that dump.” He revved the engine in a display of sexual assertiveness and gunned it out of the parking lot.

Leroy went home to the trailer he shared with Allison, who was his current lover, and their newborn son. He changed, ate a hot pocket, got into a yelling match with Allison over him never being home or helping with chores, snorted a line, chugged a beer, then gunned it down the road to Willys.

Willys looked like it did most nights: dirty, sleazy, and dangerous. The kind of place you might catch a disease that modern medicine had long ago taken off the map. Leroy walked in like he owned the place, calling all the regulars by name when he insulted them. He ordered a pitcher of beer, shot some pool, harassed the female barback, ordered another pitcher, harassed a couple of women who had wandered in accidentally for the first and last time, took a shot, then another shot, ordered another pitcher, then finally harassed who turned out to be the self-proclaimed fuck buddy of Hot Rod Todd — a local biker renowned for kicking ass and forgetting names, on account of the number of asses he kicked were far too many for him to keep track.

Hot Rod Todd was out front checking out a bike when Leroy was coming to the realization that not only would he not be going home with the fuck buddy, but he may well end up as the recipient of an ass kicking. So, in his first of two acts of good prudence that night, Leroy snuck out the back door.

“Hey girl, where are you?” He said into his cellphone.

“My parents wouldn’t let me go out tonight,” said Gina.

“Where do you live? I’ll come pick you up. Take you for a ride.”

The front parking lot of the bar was now empty, and Leroy stumbled onto his motorcycle and drove off.

Leroy never made it to Gina’s house that night, which for her sake, was probably for the best. Instead, he drove entirely too fast, swerved back and forth over the middle line, and finally failed to slow down for a sharp curve, where he went off the side of the road, flipped the bike, and soared 30 feet until his body was stopped by the trunk of a pine tree.

His head made contact first.

Leroy hardly ever wore a helmet, but in what turned out to be his second act of good prudence that night, he had been wearing it when he crashed.

“I really can’t tell you how he managed to survive a direct impact to the head,” stated Dr. George Watkins, “Even wearing a helmet, most don’t survive an impact like that one. But I can assure you, with complete certainty, that if he had not been wearing the helmet that night, there would have been no chance of survival.”

At the emergency room, Leroy was able to be stabilized, at which point he promptly fell into a coma. Over the next week, family, friends, children, and baby mamas all crammed into the tiny hospital room in shifts. Some said prayers over his unresponsive body, asking God to bring him back. Many brought flowers. Several told heavily edited and, sometimes, downright fabricated stories of Leroy. Almost all of them talked directly to him, something the doctor’s had told them would help his recovery.

“We told the family from the onset,” continued Dr. Watkins, “that given an impact like that to the brain, there was a good chance that Leroy would never awaken from the coma. And that, if he did awaken, there was a strong chance that he wouldn’t be the same.”

The doctors were right that he wouldn’t be the same, though none of them would have guessed the ways in which he would change.

Missy and George, Leroy’s youngest siblings, were in the room when he regained consciousness.

“I see existence for what it truly is; and for what it is not. I see the error of my past; I now know the correct way to live. I return — anew — to the land of the living.”

The line could have used some additional tweaking, but it wasn't bad coming from a high school dropout. Regardless, its essence was lost after numerous retellings and alterations and misrememberings by dozens of people, and eventually the version of Leroy's first words out of the coma became immortalized in the family narrative as: "I'm alive, bitches."

Missy and George reacted as anyone might to the unexpected revival of a person not expected to ever speak again — they ran out of the room screaming. They came back several minutes later, followed by their parents, Mama Trout and Big Daddy Trout, and a doctor.

"Leroy, oh, I can't believe it," Mama Trout wailed, "Oh, Leroy, I can't believe you made it through. I thought we'd lost you." She wrapped him in a big hug and rocked him back and forth, an action the doctor had to intervene against.

"You did good, kid," Big Daddy Trout said, as he slapped Leroy on the back, to which the doctor again intervened.

"Leroy," the doctor said, "How are you feeling?"

"I feel better than I have ever felt in my entire life," Leroy said.

"We're going to run some tests, make sure everything is working okay. Baring any kind of abnormalities, we'll release you later today."

The doctors ran their tests and were pleased with the results. They released Leroy that day. He agreed to stay at his parent's house for two days so they could keep an eye on him while he recovered. They set him up on the pull-out couch in the living room.

"Now, Leroy," said Mama Trout, "I want you to stay in this bed and get some rest. You remember what the doctor said about getting enough bed rest."

The doctor had said nothing about getting enough bed rest. But Leroy was a changed man, and if sitting in this pull-out bed in a stale living room while his friends and family came to visit was going to make his mother happy, then that's what he was determined to do.

"Mama," Leroy said as she was tucking him into bed, "I want you to know how thankful I am for everything you ever done for me growing up. I know I ain't never said it to you, maybe never even realized it until recently, but I see it now. You sacrificed everything you could and did the best you could for us. I've got a lot of respect for you in doing that."

"Oh, hush, now," said Mama Trout, "You're just tired from being in that coma. You just get some sleep now." She turned off the hallway light leaving the room in darkness, except for the streetlight peaking in through the blinds.

"I love you, Mama," Leroy said.

Mama Trout paused for a moment, unsure of what to make of this, and after what she deemed as being too long to respond, she dismissed it entirely and went to bed.

"I hope your hungry," said Big Daddy Trout, as he popped his head into the living room, "I'm making mimosas for breakfast."

Leroy was familiar with Big Daddy Trout's breakfast mimosas which consisted of orange juice and miller lite — made inside the miller light can, which Big Daddy Trout drank down himself to allow room for the orange juice. While the old Leroy would have enjoyed nothing more than getting a buzz on first thing in the morning, the new Leroy saw no need for alcohol, or any mind-altering substance, for that matter. The way he saw it, the only thing altering his perception would do would be to make it more difficult for him to maintain a state of inner unification.

Leroy walked to the front deck and cleared away a pile of junk on the couch so he could take a seat. He sat still on the couch and entered a state of meditation, though he had no idea that was what he was doing. Eventually, his father came out looking for him.

“There you are,” Big Daddy Trout said, extending a miller lite can, “Here have a mimosa.”

Leroy came out of his state of hyperfocus and turned to his father.

“No thanks,” he said.

Big Daddy Trout looked perplexed. “You doing okay, boy? Should we take you back to the hospital?”

“I feel great. I have decided that I don’t drink alcohol no more.”

“Come on, it’s just a beer. I didn’t even put any moonshine in it, though if you want some of that, we’ve got some in the cabinet.”

“Can I just have a glass of orange juice?”

Big Daddy Trout looked at his son with mistrust until he finally went back inside.

The house stayed full that day as hordes of people came and went. Leroy’s siblings all stopped by, as did a number of extended family. Baby mamas and children came and went. Big Daddy Trout began grilling hotdogs around noon, and when supper time came around someone brought burgers and he fired the grill back up. People brought beer, liquor, pot, and the kind of drugs they felt safer doing in the privacy of the backyard. The neighbors heard the noise and came over to join the celebration. Eventually, casual acquaintances and strangers began showing up. By the time nightfall arrived, the front yard was packed with people who had no choice but to overflow into the road; the house was trashed, and a beer pong table was set up on the front lawn with a long line of waiting players.

Through it all, Leroy remained seated on the front deck, watching everything unfold — desiring no part in the activities before him, but watching with absolute calm and non-judgment. Visitors came and spoke to him throughout the day and night. Leroy spoke with compassion, kindness, and understanding to all who approached him, though these newfound qualities appeared to go unnoticed; the only idiosyncrasy receiving attention was that Leroy was declining to partake in his favorite substances, which wasn't dwelled on for long by those offering.

Leroy watched his old life reflected in the actions of his community, through the lens of his new reality; it was a life that no longer appealed to him, though he didn't plot on how to change it — all he did was watch and be.

The police arrived just after 10:30 due to a noise complaint. The police were familiar with the Troutman house, not to mention the Apple Orchard Trailer Park in general, and treated breaking up the gathering as nothing more than routine procedure.

By 11:00, the yard was empty — except for the haphazard scattering of beer cans, like a recycling center that had been hit by a tornado — and the house was quiet. After his parents went to bed, Leroy walked out to the front yard with a trash bag to clean up.

The car pulled into the driveway shortly after, illuminating Leroy in the headlights.

“Hey there, hot shot,” Gina said as she got out. “I heard you were supposed to be dead.”

“By all accounts, I reckon I should be,” he said. “I suppose the universe has a plan for me; some reason for keeping me around.”

“I've got a plan of my own for you tonight,” she said, approaching Leroy and running a hand down his chest. “I've never fucked no one that's been resurrected before.”

“Gina,” Leroy began in earnest, “I can truly tell you that I want what's best for you.” She slid a hand down to his crotch, which Leroy quickly pulled away. “We can't do this, Gina. I'm a

changed man. You deserve a lot more than having a one-night stand with someone that can't be with you. You deserve to find love."

Gina drew back, looking him over as if to double check if she was talking to the right person.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" she said. "You are not like how I heard you was."

"I've changed. I can see clearly now."

"Well, I wish you'd go ahead and change back. You're talking like a fucking pussy."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but this is who I am. Nothing is going to happen between us. I wish you nothing but the best going forward."

"Go fuck yourself," Gina said as she got back into the car and drove off.

Leroy stayed with his parents for another day — a day he largely spent taking a long walk and sitting by the creek, looking at the place he spent his formative years with a fresh set of eyes. He saw the beauty in each blade of grass, on the bark of every tree, in the running water of the creek he had played in hundreds of times before.

The following day, Leroy returned home to his own trailer. Allison and Leroy Jr. hadn't come to visit him since he had awoken from the coma — they were used to waiting on Leroy to return home on his own time. Big Daddy Trout dropped Leroy off at the top of the driveway to avoid intruding on what he pictured to be an argument of biblical proportions.

Allison was sitting on the couch in the living room breast feeding Leroy Jr. when Leroy walked through the front door. She looked up and prepared for a fight that didn't come.

"From here on out," Leroy said, "I'm going to make things right. I'm going to be here for you. I'm going to be here for our child. Things are different this time around."

Things were different this time around. Leroy kept his word — he went to work to bring home money for his family and then he came home to spend time with them. He stopped going to Willys and he stopped sleeping around. He made plans to catch up on child support. He took long walks when he could, and when he couldn't, he would sit on the front deck of his trailer, taking in the complexity of the life existing all around him.

His friends and family did finally notice this change in Leroy. In fact, the Troutman's called a family meeting on their front porch at Apple Orchard Trailer Park to discuss Leroy. All Leroy's siblings were there, as were his grandparents, some aunts and uncles, some cousins and nephews, and four baby mamas. The only recurring member of the family not invited was Leroy himself.

"The doctors says there ain't no brain damage," Big Daddy Trout said, "That he's completely normal."

"He don't seem normal to me," said Uncle Johnny, "I asked him last week could he score me some coke and he said he don't do that no more."

"He don't ever come down to Willys no more," said Leroy's brother Jimbo.

"He don't come to Willys," repeated Uncle Johnny, "He don't drink no more, don't smoke no more. I don't hardly see him around town at all — spends all his time working and at home. That ain't like him!"

"He told me," Aunt Trudy said, "he wishes me happiness in life and he's here if I ever need anything. What the fuck is that shit?"

“He told me,” Suzie — Leroy’s sister — said, “he told me that he don’t got no desire for nothing no more. He got no more cravings. Why would anyone wanna go through life not wantin nothin?”

“He told me,” said Granny Trout, “that he could spend the rest of his life just looking at a single pine cone and be happy. That ain’t normal.”

“It ain’t like him,” said Uncle Johnny, and several voices echoed.

“It ain’t like him,” said Mama Trout. “We all had our problems with Leroy before the accident.” She scanned the room, locking eyes with victims as she mentioned his transgressions. “He lied and stole. He stole Timmy’s car and wrecked it.” Timmy nodded in agreement. “He couldn’t go a minute without getting into an argument with someone. He drank too much; he did too much dope. He hit Patrick upside the head with a nine iron.” Patrick nodded in agreement. “He was a bad father and provider.” All four baby mamas nodded their approval. “Leroy was about as selfish as they come. He was far from perfect. But he was him.” Several amens sprang up from the crowd. “He was him. And this new Leroy... well, he just ain’t himself.” Several more amens sprang forth.

“He’s downright boring now.”

“He don’t ever do nothin no more.”

“It’s not normal for a boy like that to go from wild as can be to just sitting around watching everyone else have fun.”

“So, what do we do?” asked Aunt Jenny.

The crowd went quiet and turned to Big Daddy Trout and Mama Trout.

“What we’re going to do,” said Mama Trout, “is we’re gonna have an intervention.”

The intervention was scheduled for the following weekend. Mama Trout called Leroy, asking him to come over and help his father fix the toilet. He borrowed Allison's car and drove over.

He immediately knew something was going on as soon as he pulled up. The driveway was empty except for his parent's cars, though the neighbor's driveway that was two trailers down was packed full of cars that Leroy recognized as belonging to members of his family. He swallowed this mistrust, recognizing some kind of trap, but concluded that whatever was planned couldn't be too bad.

He walked through the front door as best he could, given that the living room was packed full of guests. He looked around at everyone — noticing the solemn look in their eyes. He was confused, but remained calm.

"Leroy," spoke his father, "why don't you have a seat here in the middle of the room?"

Leroy sat down on a swivel chair, spinning the chair around to look at everyone.

"Here, Leroy," said his mother, "I got you some orange juice. With no alcohol, just how you like it."

"Thank you," Leroy, parched, said as he took a long sip.

"You may have figured this out already," said Big Daddy Trout, "but there ain't no problem with the toilet."

"There may be after having this many Troutman's under one roof," said Patrick.

Everyone laughed.

"The reason you're here," said Big Daddy Trout, "is that we're all worried about you. We're worried about the way you been actin since you got out of that coma. So, we're givin you

an intervention. I don't want you to go getting scared and tryin to run out. We're all here cause we care about you."

Leroy nodded. "I will agree to hear ya'll out."

And hear them out, Leroy did. He listened with respect as his loved ones told him how they didn't care for his recent behavior — all the talk of love and kindness, all the patience, all the acceptance of responsibility. They wanted the old Leroy back; the fun Leroy.

The time passed as everyone took their turn to speak, Leroy swiveling in the chair to face each speaker. He felt a dizziness coming over him, which he initially attributed to the movement of the chair.

"I don't want to interrupt," he said politely, "but I'm getting very dizzy. I think I may need to lay down."

"That didn't take as long as I thought that it would," said Uncle Johnny.

"Just a couple more minutes, Leroy," said Big Daddy Trout, "then you can lay down. Now, what do you make out of everything that everyone has said to you?"

Leroy swallowed hard, his mouth dry and cotton-like. "I appreciate all ya'lls concerns. But I can't just change back to how I was. I don't understand it, but I see things in an all new way now. I see the truth. And I've got to use that for good." He swayed in his chair, the dizziness getting worse. "What is happening to me?"

"Now, Leroy, listen up," said Big Daddy Trout, "I want to apologize for drugging you. But we did drug you. Mashed up the pills in the orange juice." Leroy sank back further into the chair as his father's face swam in front of him. "We did it cause we care. Cause this next part is gonna hurt, and we don't want you to have to feel it."

“Leroy,” Mama Trout said as her face swam into focus beside his father’s, “Leroy, we’re doing this for your own good. The doctor said your brain ain’t damaged; its just different from the impact. We’re gonna try to change it back. Shouldn’t need but a couple good whacks.” Leroy could make out Uncle Johnny in the corner, twirling a baseball bat. “Go to sleep now, Leroy. We’ll see you on the other side. You’re gonna be just the way you was.”

Leroy sat slumped back on the couch watching day time cable.

On the tv, a woman in a baggie white t-shirt, the back spray painted in blue cursive “Hey Mom”, walked over to the big wheel with the prize amounts displayed in even sections. She reached up as high as she could, grabbed a handful, and forced the wheel into a spin. Lights flashed and theme music played.

Leroy laughed wildly and clapped his hands.

“Alright, Leroy,” Mama Trout said as she came into the living room carrying a tray, “time for your lunch.

Leroy stopped celebrating and looked at her blankly. Mama Trout tied a bib around Leroy’s neck and pulled it down straight to cover his shirt.

“Here comes the airplane,” she said, as she spooned a glob of purple mush from a bowl, supplying airplane noises as the spoon approached Leroy’s waiting mouth.