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YOU'RE IT

By Morgan Mayfield

"There's no way I'm getting out of here," the tiny voice in the back of my head says.

But I quickly switch the narrative.

"There's no way I'm dying here. Not right now. Not happening."

Because if I let that first thought settle in, I will lose, and losing is absolutely not an option right now.

Note: it is unimaginably hard to breathe totally silently while hiding from your potential murderer.

What's wild is I always enjoyed thriller movies and would scream at the screen for the hidee to stop breathing so damn loud, and now that I am in this situation, I realize that was just a little more realistic than I expected. Granted, I do have asthma, plus I've been running. Not to mention I'm slightly out of shape.

If I make it out of here, I've got to hit the gym.

Back to the task at hand, how *the hell* do I get out of here?

It was a gloomy sort of day, so although it was daytime, the shade of the trees overhead made it look like evening, swallowing the light and turning everything into a dim grey haze.

The air is damp on my skin, thick like I'm breathing through a straw instead of just...air. I can smell it, earthy and wet. Hopefully that's not me I smell.

The ground beneath me is soft and mushy, almost spongy, soaked with rain and old layers of rotting leaves. The environment feels like it's working against me, actively closing in. Like it's testing how long I can hold it together.

The birds are singing above me, which is a beautiful momentary distraction, but even that feels off. Too sharp and loud because my sense is turned up past normal.

A different bird chirps in a much lower pitch. Closer.

Then silence.

Suddenly, the leaves crunch, echoing around me. Not too loudly or dramatically, but just enough, which makes it worse. Because now I *know* they're close.

It's worse because now it's not just a fear; I have sixth-sense confirmation.

Not one direction. Multiple.

Left.

No, right!

No. *Behind me.*

I press my back harder against the tree I have taken shelter under, like I can melt into it if I try hard enough. We can call this channeling my inner "tree hugger".

The rough, uneven bark digs into my spine, pressing through my shirt. It feels cool against my overheated skin. I suddenly feel the sharp prick of a splinter catching slightly near my shoulder blade, but I don't move.

I can't.

My legs are starting to cramp and tremble from being crouched for so long. Tiny, uncontrollable shakes that feel way louder than they should be. Wow, cardio and leg day all in one, go me.

My chest tightens again, not just panic, but that familiar, wheezy warning. My lungs start to feel smaller as if they're folding in on themselves.

Panic is one thing, but panic when your body refuses to cooperate is a whole different level of helplessness.

Great. This is how I go out: taken down by cardio and poor lung function.

I feel that tickle hit my throat like it does when I'm about to have a coughing fit.

Sharp and Sudden. I clamp my hand over my mouth.

I'm in immediate danger!

Don't cough.

Don't cough.

Don't—

My lungs seize, demanding release, and my chest jerks to fight for my life. *Literally.*

I swallow it down, eyes watering. Forcing it back like I can physically shove the cough deeper into my chest. It hurts like when you swallow a potato chip the wrong way. My vision blurs from the tears in my eyes. I've never wanted to *AH-HEM* so badly in my life.

There's another sound. A shift. A step. Something brushing against branches. I can hear the ever-so-light footsteps, and they're circling.

Circle in on their prey.

Slow, methodical, patient.

Measured.

Intentional.

Of course they are. That's what they do in movies.

Whoever "they" even is.

Because let's be realistic, I still have no idea what I'm running from.

Twenty minutes earlier.

"I'm telling you, it's this way," I say, holding up my phone as if the signal will magically return if I believe in it hard enough. But when they say wish-upon-a-star, I don't think they mean an orbiting satellite dish.

The screen flickers between one bar and nothing. Useless.

The tree trunks are all tall and identical, like nature's copy-paste mistakes.

"Your GPS has been wrong three times already," Marcus says behind me. There is a slight hesitation in his voice now. Not full panic. But not relaxed either.

And I know he rolled his eyes, so I plan to hold a grudge.

"It's recalculating," I retort irritably. "That's not the same thing."

I definitely rolled my eyes.

"It's been recalculating since we left the parking lot."

The trail we're on starts to narrow slightly, the gravel thinning out and turning to packed dirt. Tree roots push up out of the ground, forcing us to watch where we step.

It's starting to feel quieter than usual, like something is pressing down on the sound. Even the wind was struggling to move its way through the branches.

The trees are getting closer together. And *taller*. Blocking out more of the sunlight.

In my defense, the trail *looked* clearly marked. And the sign at the entrance definitely didn't say anything about a "limited service area" or "you might get lost and possibly die."

Or it did. Honestly, I don't know. I wasn't really reading for survival; I was reading for vibes. Or not at all. Whatever's clever.

Marcus scans the area around us again, slower. Watching.

We're here because we decided to do some gem hunting in the area, not far from our houses, since we've gotten some pretty cool items before.

Amethyst and garnet are the top gems we have spotted, but they say you can find diamonds out here, too.

We'll see if we get that lucky.

"Relax," I say, waving him off. "We're literally in a park. Worst case, we loop back."

Marcus doesn't look convinced. He pauses for half a second before following me again, glancing around at the trees, which, now that I'm really looking, all look the same.

Tall pines and hickories, lush with needles and leaves.

It's so much quieter than it should be.

No voices, no footsteps from other hikers.

Just us.

Okay. Slightly concerning. But still. Not a *die-in-the-woods* kind of concern.

I feel that subtle unease, but I ignore it.

Now.

I was wrong.

Very, very wrong. Because this? This is absolutely *die-in-the-woods* energy. I couldn't have planned it better if I were the killer myself.

I wasn't just wrong about the trail or phone signal; I was wrong about how quickly things can go from normal to a complete shit show.

And also, where is Marcus?

It's been a bit since I've been hiding, and other than the creepy-ass forest-y footsteps happening around me, I haven't seen or heard signs of a single *sane* person.

That thought hits me like a slap. Because one minute he was behind me, complaining and I assume eye rolling, and the next—

Nothing.

No voice.

No footsteps.

No sarcastic commentary.

Just... gone.

And for the first time, it's not just about me getting out, it's about the fact that I might not be the only one who doesn't.

I shut my eyes for a second.

I replay the last time I heard him in my head. The exact tone and distance. Too close for him to just disappear.

My ears start ringing, a high-pitched, steady whine that drowns out everything else for a second.

It starts to get quiet. Too quiet.

Focus.

Worrying about Marcus is not going to help me survive this, whatever *it is*. I have to focus on one crisis at a time.

I hear another crunch.

Closer this time. I stop moving. **WTF.**

My mind is trying to be rational.

Okay. Potential Predators:

1. One person. Bad.
2. Multiple persons. Worse.
3. It's an animal.

When I think about it in terms of a list, it makes the situation feel manageable: as if I know what's coming and can control it.

I absolutely cannot control it. I can barely control my breathing.

I pause.

Actually... animals might be worse.

I've heard of people fighting off bears or kangaroos before, but I'm not sure if I have that kind of stamina, definitely not without a puff off my inhaler.

Because at least people have motives.

Animals just... do things. And I don't know enough about wildlife to negotiate with that.

—

Something moves in my peripheral vision.

Fast. Low to the ground.

Time is moving slowly in the worst way possible.

Oh shit, here we go.

I jerk, almost yelping, but manage to choke it back into a strangled inhale.

My vision starts to tunnel and blur as adrenaline spikes hard and fast through my system.

Okay.

Okay no.

That was definitely not a person. Unless the person is crawling. Which feels... unlikely?

Concerning? Both? Definitely both, and one thousand percent concerning.

Forty minutes earlier.

"Did you hear that?" Marcus asks.

"Hear what?"

"That."

We both stop walking. There's a rustling sound somewhere off the trail. Subtle, but steady.

We stare down the trail ahead, but nothing reveals itself.

I roll my eyes. Again. "It's probably a squirrel."

"A squirrel doesn't sound like that."

"Oh, I'm sorry, are you a squirrel expert now?" I say confidently out loud, but second-guess in my head because the rustling was a bit heavier-sounding than a squirrel, but I didn't want to freak out.

"I'm just saying—"

The sound stops, just like that. We stand there in silence for a second longer than is comfortable.

Then I laugh.

"See? Nothing."

Once again, outwardly confident, inwardly balking.

I look back to see his unenthusiastic expression.

Marcus doesn't laugh back.

Now.

I should have listened to Marcus.

I should have stayed on the main trail. I should have turned around when my phone lost signal. I should have a lot of things. But mainly, I should not be crouched behind a tree right now, trying not to die.

I just want to take a deep breath!

How am I still here, hiding? I've got to make a run for it or something.

I take one giant deep breath in and try to let it out in a controlled manner to get ready for my big break. I adjust myself, ready to stand.

My foot slips slightly on loose leaves, sending a small scatter of debris across the ground.

Too loud. Way too loud.

Shiiiiit.

I'm startled to see another movement in the greenery a few yards in front of me.

It's small and low.

My brain scrambles to categorize it. Animal. No. Person. No.

It's like... really small. Maybe knee-high.

There's another shift

And then—

There's a sudden burst of movement. Right in front of me. The big green shrubs burst open as if they were jack-in-the-boxes.

I flinch so hard I almost fall over.

So much for my cat-like reflexes, I thought I was better than that.

I blink. Because what I'm looking at...

...does not make sense.

And it's—

A kid? *What the hell...*

The figure stumbles slightly over a root, then straightens. Tiny. Hoodie up. Muddy shoes.

I just stare because I don't accept it immediately.

My brain, which has been operating in full survival mode, does not know how to process this new information because fear already decided what this moment was supposed to be like, and this wasn't it.

I *was* mentally prepared for:

- Serial killer

- Forest monster
- Rabid animal

I was **not** prepared for:

- Small child

Not an immediate threat in the slightest, but you know...you can't trust kids in movies, so he's still suspicious in my book.

The kid turns and sees me.

We both freeze.

For a moment, we just... look at each other. I start to take a breath (finally), then—

"You're it!" the kid yells. And *runs at me*.

I scream. Like, full-on horror movie scream.

Not only because I know what's happening, but because I don't, and that feels just as dangerous.

And I don't care how small you are, if you suddenly charge at me in the woods after I've been running for my life, I am going to assume the worst. And like I said earlier, SUSPICIOUS! Like, who hasn't seen *The Omen* or *Children of the Corn*? Creeps.

I bolt. Again.

Because I have not done enough cardio today.

My lungs burn instantly, like I skipped straight into punishment mode.

The air scrapes past my lungs, uneven and desperate.

The branches around me snap against my arms as I push through them, one taking my shoulder victim once again.

My legs feel heavy and uneven as the leaves slide under my shoes, nearly taking me

down. But they won't get me today.

"Wait!" the kid shouts behind me. "You have to tag me back!"

Tag?

Tag!

I start to slow down just slightly. Enough to turn my head. The kid is still chasing after me, but there is something different about it now.

Less... murderous intent. Less suspicious. More... playground enthusiasm.

"You're playing tag?" I say, half jogging, half wheezing.

I *can* stop jogging now.

"Well, yeah!" the kid says, like I'm the crazy person here. "You ran first!"

"I RAN BECAUSE I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO KILL ME!"

The kid stops in his tracks.

The look of bewilderment on his face told me I was stupid.

"...Why would I do that?"

I stop as well. Because, honestly... That's a great question.

We stand there, catching our breath. Well, *they're* catching their breath. I am actively fighting for oxygen. But at least I can do this worry-free now.

"Are you okay?" the kid asks.

"I have asthma," I manage.

"Oh." He looks off into the distance.

There's a momentary pause.

"Do you need an inhaler?"

I throw my head back to the sky. "...Yes."

Five minutes later.

I sit on a huge rock, which is big enough that we had to climb up it a little, which didn't make me too happy, considering all I've done today.

The surface is smooth and warm from the sun. With my legs trembling from running and rock climbing, I am thankful for nature's chairs.

My chest aches, a dull lingering pressure from everything it just went through. I mentally apologize to myself and place my hand on my chest.

I'm taking slow, controlled breaths as my lungs gradually decide to cooperate again.

Adrenaline lingers beneath my skin, refusing to fully leave. Part of me wants to laugh, and part of me wants to lie down and never move again. Honestly.. I'm reeeally okay with the latter right now.

It came to me quickly how my brain snapped to fill in the blanks, turning shadows into threats and nothing into something.

The kid, whose name is apparently Liam, sits cross-legged in front of me like this is totally normal.

He must often chase down asthmatic adults.

"So why were you hiding?" he asks.

"Why were you chasing me?" I shoot back.

"I wasn't chasing you," he says. "I was playing."

"You were *following* me through the woods."

"Yeah. Because you ran."

I stare at him. This is... technically logical. Deeply annoying. But logical.

I still had more questions about where he came from and why the hell he was out here

alone, but I think I should check on Marcus's whereabouts first.

"Have you seen another person?" I ask suddenly.

"Tall, talks too much, probably complaining?"

Liam nods. This time, *he* rolls his eyes.

We've got major attitude flying around here today.

"Yeah. He went that way." He points off to the left.

The opposite direction of where Liam and I were coming from.

How? And how is Liam so damn fast? He's seen both of us in this timeframe?

Jeesh, what I would give to be young again.

Relief washes over me so quickly that I almost laugh out loud.

"Is he okay?"

"He looked confused."

"Yeah. That makes sense." I nod my head in agreement.

I stand up, and my legs, my lungs, my entire body protest, but I am alive. Which, honestly, was not guaranteed twenty minutes ago.

What a feeling to know your fate has been lifted.

As Liam leads me back toward the trail, I can't help but shake my head. All that fear. All that running. All that mental preparation for my dramatic final moments. And it turns out... I was being chased by a kid playing tag.

It's hilarious and embarrassing how real the fear felt compared to how harmless the truth was.

I can't help but notice how different everything feels now.

The same trees. The same path.

But no longer closing in. No longer watching.

"Hey," Liam says as we walk. "You run really fast."

I snort.

"That was fear."

"Still counts."

We break through the pine and hickory trees and back onto the gravel trail. And there, finally, is Marcus.

Pacing. Panicked.

Running a hand through his hair.

Very much alive.

He looks over at me, relief hits his face before the panic has time to fully leave.

"Where have you been?!" he demands the second he sees me.

I open my mouth.

Pause. Then shrug. I almost looked as if everything was no big deal. A great way to stay smooth in the moment.

"Long story."

He looks at Liam. Then back at me.

"...Why is there a child with you?"

I sigh.

"You're not going to believe me." I pat Marcus on the back and just keep walking while shaking my head and giggling at myself. What a proper scare.

Later, as we finally make our way back to the parking lot, I pull out my phone. Still no signal. Still lost, technically, but no longer convinced, I'm about to die. Which feels like progress.

"Next time," Marcus says, "we stay on the main trail."

"Next time," I agree, "we go somewhere with Wi-Fi."

I pause and look at Marcus.

And then I add, "*And* I start working out."

Marcus raises an eyebrow. The look was one of full amusement.

"Because of the running?"

"Because I almost died from breathing too loudly."

As we walk back, the same sounds are there: birds, leaves, wind, but now they're where they belong.

Not everything is a threat, and not everything is watching me.

Probably.

But fear doesn't need facts to be real. Just a little silence, shadows, and imagination.

—

Note to self:

Not everything chasing you is trying to kill you.

But still run...

Just in case.