

I was running. Or it felt as if we were running and had been running for some time—my legs wobbled, my throat constricted, my temples hurt, a dull ache. I stepped through the bramble and a gray limb grabbed my shirt sleeve. I jerked my shoulder. The limb snapped. I kept moving.

I wasn't on any trail. Not any more. I stood still, listening to a thrum in ears, as if there were water rushing through the ear canal. To my right, something seems to move. The land seems to shift, the trees disappear momentarily and the ground under my feet feels like sand.

I pass the sensation off to dehydration, maybe the beginning of a hallucination. Something seems to move past me. I shouldn't have left the main trail, but I'd come to these trails dozens of times, almost every weekend since it had warmed up at the end of February. I thought I knew this place well enough I could take off, explore a little beyond the marked paths. But I've been caught in the bramble of thin grey bare-leaved trees for at least an hour. A thicket. Not the familiar junipers that suck in the humidity along the trail, but a crosshatch of spindly branches.

The branches crack and snap when I move through them. I can only walk ten-twenty feet before my breath feels sucked from my lungs. As I walk, I become aware of the sensation my feet are dragging through thick sand, but when I look down, I see the brown mulch of leaves that litter that layer the ground. The sensation must come from weary feet in heavy hiking boots. I have stopped again. I rub the back of my neck where the sun hits it and look up: the sunlight dapples through the branches but I have no idea where the sun is. Is it east? West?

No compass and my phone's batteries discharged some time ago. I couldn't call for help anyway. I'm not certain I'm still in the park. I could be on private property. Hadn't I stepped over a strand of rusty barbed wire fence somewhere? God, I wish I could that. Or some other landmark.

My legs wobble as I search for something familiar. I grab a narrow tree trunk, steady myself. My head begins to ache worse. Clearly dehydrated. Dehydrating. I lower myself and sit on a pile of brackish

brown leaves. I take a sip from my water bottle, swish the water around my mouth, swallow. Another sip, then a gulp. Drain the bottle. Open my backpack. Two full bottles left. A liter. Enough then if I could find the trail in the next ten minutes or so. But the heat.

To cool off I pour about half a bottle of water into my cap. Let what little breeze there is cool my head. Water dribbles over my cheeks, under my collar. I take a deep breath and say to myself, "Chris, I'm sorry." I wish my phone worked. I could call my wife, let her know I'm dehydrating out in the heat and I'm sorry I've gotten lost and overheated. Movement through the branches startles me and I sling my pack over my shoulder and scramble to my feet.

A few steps and I stumble, the toe of my boot snagging something, a rock, twisting my ankle. I fling my arms forward to break my fall, and the last thought before blackness comes is that I'm going to die.

The blackness lifts. My head throbs. Keep my eyes closed and roll on my back. Dirt, dust, sand, something clings to my sweat-damp arms.

Eyes open. Catch a shadow. A figure. Hard to tell if it's human. A wolf? An angry farmer?

"Lay still," the figure says. Human. Male. He stands, a silhouette against a creamy sunset, a dusty scrim around him.

Dusty? A park ranger? Must be outside of the park.

"Help is on the way," the figure says.

He kneels close, brown robes billowing out caught in a harsh hot wind.

Oh, I get it, I think. A hallucination as a die. Obi Wan saving Luke from the sandpeople . . .

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3b

He acted as if he knew me, the short man with black-rimmed glasses who stood at the door.

"Taylor? Where have you been? They sent me over to look for you."

They? I've been at this place since last night. I woke up here, in a bed I assumed was mine, sort of hungover; the desk calendar on the night stand said it was Saturday, August 12. I had a headache, but wasn't nauseated. Something in the back of my mind pricked. That prickle told me I was usually nauseated when I had drunk too much. I don't remember where I was when I drank so much. All I remember is the incessant knocking on my front door and opening the door to find this man in front of me. Who was looking for me on a Saturday?

I played along with this man who thought my name was Taylor. Perhaps Taylor was my name. For some reason my name had escaped me. I reminded myself not to drink so much.

"Um, yeah, I'm here. It's Saturday. Where else would I be?"

"Oh man, you are out of it. Dude, it's Thursday. And Tracy's in a red-faced rage. He's about to fire your ass. If you don't show up like yesterday." He lifted a cigarette to his lips. He had a scar on his chin and his cheeks were sunken.

"Thursday?"

"You didn't call in. I told him I'd go looking for you. Gave you the benefit of the doubt and thought you might have been too sick or too dead to call in." He took another drag from his cigarette.

"People are worried."

"Thursday." Well, now I was really confused. Apparently I had a job. Of course I had a job. Couldn't afford an apartment like this without a job. But, I wouldn't have a job for long, according to the man standing on my front porch, because I had not called in sick for three days and some man named Tracy was going to fire me if I didn't show up immediately and explain myself.

I kept playing along. "I have been sick. Fever. Think I may have slept a lot. A long time."

"I'd say so." This man smiled wryly. "And I'm pretty sure Tracy will believe that you've been sick. Death warmed over, as they say."

I made an effort to smile.

“Why don’t I take you to work? Talk to Tracy. Let him know you’re still alive. Barely.”

“Thursday,” I said. “Not Saturday?”

“Not Saturday.”

I shrugged. “Let me get some clean clothes on.” I was sick. A fever. That explained the headache. Maybe this man could take me to the doctor after I convinced my boss I was sick. I stepped aside to let the man in.

There was a closet in the living room, but there were only jackets and sportcoats hanging in it. The man gave me a puzzled look.

“Sorry, I . . . my head’s a little fuzzy.”

There was another closet in the bedroom. I went to it.

The clothes I put on seemed to fit. A pair of faded jeans, a green sportshirt. I guessed this was how I dressed normally.

I picked up a wallet from the dresser drawer. I thought it might seem weird to my new friend if I checked my license to see what my name was and get a better idea what I looked like, so I just stuck the wallet in the back left pocket of my jeans—where it felt right—and told the man I was ready to go.