



Escape

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After a frustrating attempt at teaching class via Zoom, I stepped out of my office and checked on how my own children were doing with distance learning. Jack, my 12-year-old, was “in P.E.,” trying to duplicate the ridiculous calisthenics on the screen to the rhythm of the accompanying music. Just like a normal school day, he had woken up, combed his hair, brushed his teeth, and put on his school clothes. As I witnessed him trying his best to follow the teacher’s directions in all his youthful naivety, I wanted to lash out at our new normal and I felt a sudden compulsion to get away.

Not just out of the house. I had done that several times since the quarantine began, and that resulted in irritations and corresponding passive aggressive gestures, like rolling my eyes at the guy at Vons who clearly got well within six feet of me in the checkout line. I had heard platitudes like, “we’re all in this together,” but I wasn’t feeling or seeing it. I needed to get much further away than my local grocery.

I suggested to Jack that we go hiking, figuring that a walk would give him a proper workout and help both of us escape the tyranny of illuminated screens. He was up for it. I grabbed *Afoot and Afield in San Diego*, downloaded information on my All Trails App, packed snacks and water. We headed out for an eight miler in Laguna.

The clean air and warm sun offered an effective respite from lockdown, but we could not escape the flies—large, marble sized ones that buzzed around our ears and bit our exposed skin. I tried to ignore them, but Jack complained about them incessantly despite my arguing that complaining wouldn’t help.

“Look,” I said after about two miles. “If you can get through the last six miles without mentioning the flies, we’ll stop on the way home and get the Lego set you’ve been wanting.”

The flies abated and we progressed despite Jack’s occasional worries that we were off the trail. Near the eight-mile point, after I declared my car was “right up there, over this little hill,” I realized I was wrong. When I opened up my Maps app, all I could see on the screen was an expansive field of green without roads or structures. We were in the middle of nowhere.

I tried to stay calm and act rationally, but Jack kept asking me questions I could not answer, and I chose a series of random trails to follow before finally agreeing with Jack that we should backtrack.

“Promise me you’ll call 911,” he said a mile later.

“I think we’re okay,” I said. In my twenties and thirties I ran marathons and

believed I still knew how to power through exhaustion. Plus, I did not want to be on the evening news. I imagined how the reporter would lead with the latest Covid infection rates and death tolls before talking about me. “Not only did he put his own son at risk and cost taxpayer money,” I imagined him saying, “but we have also learned that he is a teacher at Morse High School and was hiking when he was supposed to be holding office hours for his students.”

But a mile later, when we were almost out of water and I had less than 10 percent of my battery life remaining, I finally admitted that, now fifty, my marathon days were done. I couldn’t just will myself to continue.

Things got bleaker when I realized we were out of cell range.

“Go up that hill,” I said. “When you get in range, call 911. Tell them everything you can about our location. Then come back.”

For fifteen minutes, I tried to find a patch of shady grass to lay down on to rest. But the flies were back and more aggressive than ever. I suddenly realized I was not in a clear state of mind and had not been for some time. I was confused about everything and had allowed my state of mind to lead to being on this trail, far from everything, far from even myself. I was defeated.

That’s when I heard the helicopter approaching.

The following morning, I limped into the kitchen, where Jack was calling his best friend.

“Asher,” he said. “I have the most *epic* story to tell you.”

I swallowed some Advil.

“Yesterday” he began, “when I first saw my dad, I noticed that he looked really, really depressed.”

I went back to my room, laid down, and cried harder than I have in years. I tried to suppress the tears but they kept coming. I cried for shame of my recklessness, but more importantly because I wanted my children to be able to go to school, interact with their friends, attend sporting events and dances, and feel like their future will be better than their nows. I cried in the admission that I know that I’m helpless to fix the problems that they and we all face. I put the pillow over my face as the tears surged.

Everyone recognized my vulnerability and knew that my feelings were still raw, so for the next month the helicopter rescue was not mentioned. But then, during my daughter’s drive-by birthday, my close friend yelled to Jack from the car.

“Thank you for saving your dad’s life,” he said.

He was joking, but I understood the best thing I did that day was to admit my own vulnerability and put my trust in Jack. I felt suddenly free.

“After this,” I told Jack, “Let’s go get that Lego.”

It would be comforting to believe that some benign force might suddenly, miraculously appear, swoop us all up, and deliver us to safety from the status quo. But instead, I’m doing my best to keep my family and myself safe, and trying to believe the cliché that we are all, sincerely, in this together.

