

RUN BY

PAUL J. KEARNS
SNEAKER GURU

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All characters, names, locations are used in a fictitious manner. Any events described are or similarities to any real life event are purely coincidental.

This short story was my entry into ‘The Ghosties’ anonymous story competition, run by Inigo Mort, where it was named ‘Run For Your Life’ I have re-edited the story and made a few small changes and additions. Nothing, however, that changes the fundamental story.

Since he could remember Ryan Wicks had lived for the outdoors. He had climbed skied and snowboarded all the high peaks in Europe, swam in six of the seven oceans, wing suited, and base-jumped just about everywhere from the Americas to East Asia. That had been from his early teens to his mid-forties. Now as he approached his forty-sixth birthday he had been looking to slow down a little.

He was sitting on a flight to the USA. Destination McGee Tyson airport just south of Knoxville. When the plane landed he collected his luggage, then boarded a coach heading to a Best Western Hotel in Murphy, Nantahala national forest in North Carolina. A young man with spiky hair and a seemingly ever-present grin processed his check in.

“So, Mr Wicks. You’re staying just one night,” said the Clerk.

“Yes,” said Ryan.

“Oh, you’re British,” said the clerk maintaining that smile.

“Yes, I am,” replied Ryan.

“You’ve come all the way here and you’re only staying one night,” said the clerk.

“Just for tonight. I’m here to hike part of the Appalachian trail,” said Ryan.

“Oh yeah? That’s amazing. You’ll have a great time. How far are you planning to go?” said the clerk.

“I’m only here for 2 weeks, so I’m just going to do as much as I can, and then reluctantly return to civilisation,” said Ryan with a smile.

“Well, if its isolation you’re looking for you’re in the right place. The Nantahala Forest is huge. Just keep your GPS to hand. It’s easy to get turned around in there,” said the clerk.

“Thanks for the advice,” said Ryan with a smile. The clerk handed him the keycard and wished him a good night. Ryan set off to find his room. Upon locating it he slid the card through the reader on the door and pushed it open. He walked into the room and looked around. This would be the last comfortable night he would have for the next fourteen days. He plugged all his chargeable equipment into the available sockets and logged onto the hotel Wi-Fi. Finally he had everything set up, so he ordered some food to be delivered to the hotel. He ate, checked his emails, spent some time letting his friends know he had arrived, then got into bed.

An alarm on his phone woke him just after the sun rose. He got out of bed in a good mood and showered. After he dried off and dressed he prepared his equipment, made sure everything he would need was close to hand, and easily accessible in his pack. Then made his way downstairs, checked out and left the hotel. While walking to a local superstore he noted the location of the bus station. This would take him to the nearest Hiker’s Lodge on the edge of the forest. He bought some chocolate bars, energy shakes, and batteries for the few flashlights he couldn’t charge with his solar energy power bank. When everything was ready he made his way to the station and caught the bus.

It was just before 7 am when he arrived at the lodge. After using the facilities he checked his GPS locator. A few of the hikers engaged him in conversation before they all headed out onto the trail together. A few hours passed and Ryan was on his own. The people had fallen into their own pace. Some were way ahead of him, and some were way behind.

As the sun filtered through the trees, he hummed happily to himself as he walked. The trees were dense here and the foliage was thick.

“I’m really doing this. I can’t believe I’m actually here,” he said to himself.

He smiled and continued to hike, observing all the plants and trees around him. There were insects and birds flittering from tree to tree, and among the foliage. Ryan breathed deep and relished the clean and natural scents in the air. The day passed faster than he realised and soon the sun was making its way towards the horizon. He knew he would have to make camp in the next half hour. He found a flat area just off the trail and set up his tent. There was plenty of wood and kindling to make a small fire. On it he cooked a meal then warmed himself by it as he ate. After extinguishing the fire he got into his tent, took off his boots and outer clothes and got into his sleeping bag.

As darkness closed in the were sounds around his tent, the likes of which he had never heard. Screeches and hoots, large animals gently walking among the trees. At some point he fell asleep, he knew this because he was woken by the sound of footfalls and a snuffling outside his tent near the opening. Wanting to draw as little attention to himself from the animal beyond his tent flak, he slid his hands up towards his face still inside his sleeping bag. He pressed the button on his wristwatch illuminating its LCD face. The digital numbers read 3:00. The thing outside suddenly stopped its snuffling and stood statue like before quickly moving away. Thoughts ran through Ryan’s mind.

'Was it me who spooked the animal some how, or did something scare it enough that it felt the need to run. Is the thing that had scared it still out there? What can I do if it decided to attack me? Come on. Calm down, Ryan.'

Eventually he relaxed and fell back to sleep. The alarm on his watch beeped. Usually almost imperceptible in an urban environment, Ryan had worried it wouldn't wake him. Out here it sounded like a Clackson.

"I'm up. I'm up," he said to no one but himself. He got dressed and stepped out of his tent. Around his camp there were hoof prints that looked to have been made by a large animal, possibly a hog or a boar. Interspersed among these prints were large four toed paw prints.

"Well, shit. Something big was here last night," he said aloud to himself.

'I'm in the forest. There are big wild animals around here. Nothing to worry about,' he thought.

He packed up his tent and equipment, ate a cold but protein heavy breakfast and set out again. Upon finding the trail he continued in the direction he had been going the day before. It was a fine day for hiking. The sun warmed the forest, but the air was just the right humidity. There was no danger of catching a chill or over heating. He walked past a small waterfall and watched as squirrels chased each other between the trees. A skunk waddled over the path and disappeared into the thick forest. The sounds of it pushing its way among the undergrowth continued for a few moments after it was out of sight. As he walked he heard the snapping of branches and something walking in the trees just beyond his line of

sight. He started to get the feeling he was being watched.

'Relax Ryan. There are a lot of things in this forest that can see me. It doesn't mean something is following me,' he thought to himself.

He stopped to eat by a tree which seemed particularly large and while he was there, he took a few photos on his digital camera. He switched the camera to menu and began to review the photos. He saw a little hint of colour among the greens and browns. As he zoomed in, he could see it was a tent.

'Someone is sleeping in, but would someone sleep in on a hiking trail. Maybe it was being used as a basecamp. Maybe someone had left it behind. Or maybe they were hurt and needed help. Out here they may not see another person for days. If they are hurt, I might be that person. I should check it out just to make sure,' he thought.

As he approached the tent, he noticed the front zip was open. There was also a tear the entire length of the far side panel. A rucksack just inside the tent looked full and well packed. The bedding and sleeping bag were still in the ground sheet. The sleeping bag was open and looked like it hadn't been slept in for a few days. The portable gas stove was folded up. It was cold when he touched the back of his fingers to it. To add to the sense of abandonment the tent flak rippled in a cold breeze which suddenly blew through the trees. He looked around the tent some more. There were some footprints in the soil in the surrounding area. They looked a little warn away like they had been made a few days ago. Large paw prints moved in the same direction. They looked similar to the ones he had found around his tent. He

followed them and eventually they disappeared and were covered with the footprints of other animals who had been through the area. He made a mental note to report this at the next ranger station or fire tower he came across. He took out his GPS and made a note of the coordinates of the area. He checked his phone and found he had no signal here. He put them back in his pockets, made his way back to the trail and continued on his way.

The day passed at a steady rate, with him stopping to eat or relieve his bodily functions few times. Soon the sun was approaching the horizon again. He set up camp for the night, ate an evening meal, and got into his tent. He wrote an account of the things he had seen at the tent while lying in his sleeping bag. Soon he was asleep.

He was suddenly aware he was awake and had no idea what time it was. As he lay there wondering what had woken him he heard the thud of footsteps and branches breaking. They moved through the trees outside his tent. They were accompanied by deep, raspy breaths. He lay completely still in the absolute darkness. The thing walked around the tent taking huge strides but keeping its distance. Its footfalls seemed deliberately heavy like whatever it was wanted him to know it was there. He then heard something he did not expect. A quiet but deep guttural laugh. Ryan's bladder threatened to let go, but he managed to keep it under control. The footfalls then seemed to be moving away fast. The trees shook and roosting birds suddenly screeched and flapped their wings as they took to the air like it had leapt up into the canopy and was moving away into the distance. He didn't sleep again for the rest of the night. Every

sound, no matter how faint, made his heart skip a beat. As the first rays of light hit the flak of his tent he was up, packed up and on his way along the trail. He was desperate now to find a forest ranger or even just another human. He walked quick and ate while he was moving. He past more babbling brooks and breathtaking views but paid them no mind. He was not going to stop for anything today.

At just after 11 am he noticed the dense trees starting to thin and there in a clearing he saw what he had been looking for. A well-maintained wooden shack. He walked up to the door, opened it and stepped inside. A tall man who looked to be in his mid-thirties, with shaggy hair and a well-maintained beard sat behind the desk to the left of the room. His feet were resting on the top and his hands were behind his head. Besides this the room was mostly bare. The man looked up at Ryan and smiled. He quickly dropped his feet to the floor and sat up.

“Good morning, sir. The names’ Kyle. How can I help you?” he said.

“I need to report, erm, well I, erm, I saw a, er,” Ryan stammered.

“Ok, sir. Take a breath, then tell me what you saw,” said Kyle.

“Ok, ok,” said Ryan and took a breath. “You are a forest ranger, aren’t you?”

“I am indeed. It says it right here on my uniform, see,” said Kyle as he pointed to the badge on his light green, short sleeved shirt.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” said Ryan.

“No need to apologise. Now what are you here to report,” said Kyle.

“I found a tent in the forest about four or five miles back up the trail. There was a huge rip in the flak. Well, it looked more like a slash. There was no one around but all the equipment was still inside. It looked like it had been abandoned, like no one had been there in a few days. I don’t know where the hiker or hunter was, so, I thought I should report it,” said Ryan.

“Hmm, that does seem unusual. The slash in the side could have been caused by an accident. Makes a tent pretty much useless. Maybe the owner just abandoned it,” said Kyle.

“But what about all the equipment that was still there. There was even a full rucksack,” said Ryan. Kyle scratched his beard.

“Yeah, that is unusual. I understand leaving the tent. But all their personal effects too? Seems mighty strange,” said Kyle.

“Yeah,” said Ryan.
Kyle squinted his eyes and stared at Ryan.

“How do you know the rucksack was full?”
“What?” said Ryan.

“The Rucksack. How do you know it was full?” said Kyle.

“I don’t know. It just looked fully packed,” said Ryan.

“You sure you didn’t have a little poke around in there? A little nosey? See if there was anything you could make use of?” said Kyle.

“No, I mean, I wouldn’t need anything they had,” said Ryan.

“So, how did you know what they had?” said Kyle.

“I have all my own equipment. All new. I bought everything specifically for this hiking holiday,” said Ryan.

“Uh hmm, A hiking holiday? You talk kinda fancy, sir. Who exactly are you?” said Kyle.

“My name is Ryan Wicks. I’m on holiday, er, vacation from Oxfordshire in England.”

“Well, Ryan from Oxfordshire in England. You have any identification? A passport, driving licence maybe?” said Kyle.

Ryan unzipped a pocket on his rucksack and took out his passport. He opened it to his identifying information and passed it across the desk. Kyle snatched it up and eyed it suspiciously for a moment.

“Ryan, Andrew, Wicks,” said Kyle, emphasising each name as he read them aloud. “From Wantage in Oxfordshire. Born 12th May 1980. Look at that photo of you. All serious and shit,” he said Laughing on the last sentence.

“Can I have that back, please,” said Ryan. Kyle suddenly became very serious.

“Well, I think I might just hold onto this. Wouldn’t want you leaving the country if it turned out you had something to do with that missing hiker,” said Kyle.

“Missing hiker?” said Ryan.

“Yep, the one from the tent you say you took nothing from,” said Kyle.

“I didn’t take anything. I already told you that. Though, I never said the owner of the tent was missing,” said Ryan, trying not to raise his voice. Kyle burst out laughing.

“Oh shoot, boy. You should see your face,” he said. He threw the passport back at Ryan. It hit him in the chest, and he fumble to catch it as it bounced off him.

Eventually he clapped it to his body after a couple of attempts.

“Is there anyone else I can talk too? Someone who will take this seriously?” said Ryan.

He could feel the anger rising in his chest.

“Oh, come on now. I was only having a little fun with you,” said Kyle.

Ryan stared at him and raised his eyebrows.

“Ok. If you want to be like that. Wyatt is in the back. Just go through the door back there.”

Ryan walked towards the door Kyle had pointed out. Placing his hand on the doorknob, he twisted it and opened the door. He froze with what awaited him inside the room.

“Though, you may want to be careful. He’s kinda fresh...”

Ryan looked at the floor, then the walls.

“...and as you can see, still bleeding,” said Kyle. Ryan looked at the man lay naked on the floor. There was blood everywhere. Clearly, one of his arteries had been severed. Both his hands were missing at least to the wrist.

“Yeah, he was a bit of a fighter,” said Kyle. Ryan stood in shocked silence. The man’s face was torn open. His right eyeball and socket were gone. The right side of his jaw and teeth were exposed where the cheek and lips had been removed. His throat had been torn out, and the surrounding muscles were shredded. The pectoral muscles of his chest had been ripped away down to his ribs in some places. His abdominal muscles were missing, and his internal organs were heaped up in a pile next to his left leg. His genitalia had also been torn away.

Ryan shuddered and tears welled in his eyes.

“What the...What the?” he stammered. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“Well, it’s quite simple. Wyatt here thought it was ok to shoot and kill one of my friends. So, I killed him,” said Kyle.

“Y-you did th-this?” said Ryan in a whimper.

“Yep. I know, he’s kinda messy but I wanted to teach him a lesson. You’ve probably already put the pieces together that I’m not really the forest ranger. This fine uniform used to belong to good old Wyatt here,”

He pointed to the forest ranger badge on his chest. Ryan looked and through his teary, half crazed eyed he read the name, ‘Wyatt.’

“I took it off him after I knocked him unconscious. I waited until he came round before, I attacked him. Where is the fun in killing something that can’t fight back? You don’t get to watch them try to survive. Not that they stand much of a chance against my kind. It’s all the crying and begging that I like. ‘Please Mr. Boo-Hoo-Hoo,’ cracks me up. And you, you caught me just after I cleaned up and showered. I just put it on for size and was trying it out when you walked in. Sorry about all that. I couldn’t resist. You know how it is. Don’t worry about him. He won’t go to waste. My clowder is waiting for me to take him back up into our territory later. The legs are big, strong muscles. You need to let them soften for a day. That way the cubs can bite a chunk off,” said Kyle.

Ryan was still stood in a kind of stupor, trying to look anywhere but at the partially consumed body on the floor.

“Why are you telling me all this?” said Ryan.

“Because you’re part of this now. Part of the fun,” said Kyle.

“What fun? What are you?” said Ryan.
The world seemed to be getting hazy.

‘Is this what insanity feels like?’ he thought to himself.

“We go by many names. The local people who lived here before the European settlers, called us Turnarounds. I like to call us Twosiders. You see I don’t just look like this. I have another side. That side looks like, well, let’s just say you probably won’t like that side. I wouldn’t be able to tear Wyatt apart the way I have if I was just a boring human like you,” said Kyle.

“What?” said Ryan.
Kyle looked at him for a few moments.

“Oh, the fun. I almost forgot. I’ve been watching you for a few days. Yep, I saw you enter the forest a few days ago, and now you have seen me. I can’t just let you go. You will tell everyone you see and then there will be people swarming all over this place hunting me. Hunting me! I don’t get hunted. I am the hunter. Me, not any of you fucking humans. I hunt you. That is the way it goes. That is the balance. Sure, I could just kill you right now, but like I say, I’m a hunter. There is no fun in that, and me, I like to have fun. So, I’m going to give you a chance, or a challenge. I know you like a challenge, or you wouldn’t be in a different country just to walk through a forest. I’m going to let you go on your way,” said Kyle.

“You’re letting me go?” said Ryan.
“Yeah. Well, for the first twelve hours at least. After that I’m going to hunt you. If you get back to the

Hiker's Lodge before I get you, you can go free, and what will be will be. If I catch you before then, I will eat you, just like Wyatt over there," said Kyle.

He said it in a nonchalant way. As if it was just an everyday thing. Ryan looked at the door to the outside and then back at the insane man before him.

"Go on then, run, boy. Hope you never seen me again," said Kyle.

Ryan didn't waste a moment. He ran, pushed the door open and ran back to the trail and into the forest. He checked his GPS as he moved. His mind was racing. He needed to make as much progress as he could in the twelve hours as he could. He ran for ten minutes and then stopped in a small clearing.

'I have to drop as much weight as possible,' he thought.

He took off his Rucksack and abandoned all the excess equipment he thought he could afford to lose. All but one change of clothes, a pair of walking boots. The approach shoes on his feet would have to be enough. An extra ground roll matt, extra tent pegs, the mallet. Two of the four flashlights, he kept the batteries though. He hid all this stuff in the undergrowth. In all he had dropped over half the weight he was carrying. He got back on the path and jogged for nearly an hour. He hadn't realised how uneven the ground was on his way into the forest. He had been taking it all in his stride. Now he was trying to cover as much ground as possible, he noticed every uneven step, every tree root, and the incline and decline of the trail. He passed the place he had slept the night before. Stopping only to catch his breath, eat an energy bar, then set off again. He ran for

another hour, then walked for another three. Eating while he was going. He passed the tent that had got him into this mess in the first place. He passed the waterfalls and viewpoints he had been so eager to take photos of the day before, not caring about them now.

After Ryan had run out of the building, Kyle spent an hour sitting at the desk. He then set about dismembering the body of Wyatt. Taking hold of the left leg by the ankle, he put his foot on the pelvis and pulled. Feeling the hip pop from its socket he continued to pull until the muscles and flesh stretched and the leg tore free from the body. He did the same with the other leg and what was left of the arms. He had to twist the head a number of times before it tore free from the body. Then after piling all the parts up onto a tarp he wrapped them up. He carried the package three miles up the mountain and stowed this latest kill in a broken-down cabin. He looked at his watch and saw five hours had passed.

“Man, these first few hours. They always take so long,” he said to himself.

As he walked out of the cabin six sets of little eyes watched him. When he was twenty feet away six furry little bodies scampered inside. He took this chance to run back towards the building growling playfully. Little giggles came from within, and he laughed too.

He strolled through the forest looking at the wildflowers and watching as the sun crept towards the horizon.

Ryan watched as the sunlight diminished among the trees. There were five hours left before Kyle would come for him. He looked at his GPS and worked out he had hiked over eight miles. Not anywhere near as much as he would have liked. He would have preferred to be back at the Hiker's lodge already but that was still another seventeen miles away along the path.

'I have to keep going. I can't risk stopping, not while that maniac is out there,' he thought.

He checked his flashlights, made sure the batteries were still good and kept walking.

Kyle had looked through the DVDs and Blu-Rays that were in the cabin and from the meagre selection had settled on The Fog. The movie was over and now he paced back and forth outside the Forest Rangers cabin. It was 10 pm and the sun had set an hour ago. The sky was almost fully dark now. The Crescent moon in the sky gave off little light. His human eyes couldn't see all much, but his other eyes would have no problem at all.

"One hour. One more fucking hour. Ooooweee! I can't wait," he said as he danced a little Jig and stamped his feet.

Ryan slowly made his way through the trees by the light of his torch. He flinched at every sound around him. Birds flew from their roosts and squirrels squeaked at him from their nests. At one point a deer jumped up and sprinted away from him causing him to let out a scream. He had to fight his survival instincts to stay on the trail and not run away into the forest.

At the same time in two different locations the two men looked at their watches. Both read '23:00.'

"Oh fuck," said Ryan.

"Oh yeah!" said Kyle. "I supposed I better change."

He stripped off all his clothes and stood naked with his feet wide apart, and his arms held out horizontally from his body. A line of jagged scar-like flesh ran down the back of his head, neck and spine. It ran out across his shoulders and down the length of his arms to the back of his hands. At the base of his spine, it split and ran over his buttocks and down the length of his legs to his ankles. This flesh began to move and separate. It started at the crown of his skull as the flesh rose and flared out up like the fins of a fish. It was translucent at the edges where blood pulsed through tiny capillaries near the surface. This continued down his neck and spine until his whole torso was splayed out making him look like he had been flattened out. The other side of this flesh was not muscle and gore but more flesh. It had a thick and rough surface to it. The features of his human face were forced together and bunched up as the flesh of his head curved over and closed in. The human face was enveloped inside his head. His chest, abdomen and pelvis were affected in the same way. The flesh around his body curved over on itself. Along his arms and legs it was now splayed out in the same way. It folded over on itself and began to meet. As it did it began to knit back together. The fingers of his human hands closed in flat to the palms, and the flesh enveloped them. Long, powerful fingers unfurled

from the other side. Sharp, retractable claws pushed out from their tips. As his knees shifted and inverted, his human feet folded up to his shins and were enclosed by his flesh. The long feet on the other side lowered down onto the ground and he raised himself up to his full height on the paws. The short snout, brow ridges, and cheek bones of his other face grew out. He worked his jaw up and down, and side to side to alleviate the stiffness. Whiskers, short coarse, mottled brown fur pushed out from the surface of his flesh. He opened his fiery, golden, feline, eyes and looked around. As a human the night had seemed like complete darkness, now he saw everything. He clapped his paw-like hands together and smiled.

“Ryan? Where are you, you fancy accented meat feast? It’s time,” he growled.

He snorted the air and caught the scent of fear and panic. He performed three jumps, pulling his knees up to his chest each time. Stretched out his legs and shook them to loosen the muscles, then ran into the forest. His movement through the trees was fast and flowing. He dodged trees and leapt over rocks with ease. This was his environment, his home. He was born of this land, belonged to it.

Ryan checked his phone. Still there was no service. He might as well have been on the moon for all the chance he had of letting anyone know where he was or what was happening to him. He checked his GPS and saw he had hiked five miles since the last time he checked. He was still on the trail and making slow but steady progress. Switching both devices off he put them back in his pockets before zipping them up. As he walked, he thought about what Kyle had said. If he

got to the Hiker's lodge, he would be safe. There was a squeal behind him and this time he did jump and instinctively begin to run. He weaved between the trees. From the noise he knew it was a boar, but his tired body was in flight mode. He crashed through the under growth, stumbled down a hillside, and tripped over tree roots. Momentarily he was airborne, then hit the ground and rolled three or four times before slamming his shoulder into a tree. He sat there dazed for a few minutes. He looked around trying to get his bearings. As he put his hands down to push himself up he let out a scream of pain. He rolled on to his left side and used his left arm and his legs to push himself up. When he got his feet under him he stood up straight. The toes of the right foot, that had caught the root, were sore and swollen, possibly broken.

Walking would be possible but with some difficulty. Placing his left hand to his right shoulder he slowly ran it down the length of the arm. As his hand moved midway over his upper arm pain burst like bolts of electricity all the way down to his fingertips and up into his shoulder.

“Ahh fuck! Yeah, there broken,” he said to no one in particular.

For a moment he thought on what he should do. It would need a sling at least to keep it immobile. He searched his pockets, nothing. He removed the rucksack strap from his left shoulder and took his arm out. Then gently removed the strap from his right shoulder and eased it down over his right arm.

Holding it between his feet he unzipped it, reached in and found a roll of duct tape. He walked over to a tree and slotted the tape onto a branch and pulled the end with his left hand and stuck it to his chest. Slowly he

raised his right hand to his chest and placed it over the tape. He raised his left arm and began to turn around and around. The tape unspooled from the roll and strapped the broken arm to his body. He cut the tape with his pocketknife and stuck the end down. He returned the tape back to his pack. He put the pack over his right shoulder, then left and secured the straps across his chest and waist with the clips. A glance at his GPS told him he was not far from the path, but his overreaction had lost him thirty minutes.

Kyle on the other hand was making great time. Air chuffed in and out of his lungs as he bounded through the trees. He was following the scent of Ryan. The fear and the panic had gone out of the scent now, but he could still sense the adrenaline and desperation. Ryan was a man who was running for all he held dear.

“I’m gonna put the fear and panic back into you when I catch up with you,” said Kyle and laughed. A deer jumped up and began to run. He chased it and was right behind it snapping at its heels. When he roared the deer squealed and bled. It switched direction repeatedly, but he stayed with it. With a burst of speed he leapt onto its back. His claws gouged deep slashes into the flesh of its side. It screamed and began to flounder. He reached forward, dug his claws into its head, and pulled it to the side and down. There was a crash and a thud as the deer lost its footing. Kyle wasted no time in burying his canine teeth into its throat, crushing its trachea and oesophagus. The deer twisted its head and kicked a little but with the hold Kyle had on it there was no way it could escape. After a few moments it was dead. He wasted no time in tearing away its skin,

biting chunks of flesh from the carcass, and swallowing them whole. After five minutes the deer was little more than bones.

“Still hungry,” growled Kyle. He licked the blood from his fur.

Ryan slowly trudged through the forest. The air had cooled since the sun had set but it was still humid. A mist had formed around him. The pain in his arm was beginning to settle into a warm, dull ache. It was still extremely uncomfortable, but it was better than the shooting bolts of pain. He pulled the cuff of his jacket back with his teeth and looked at his watch. It was just after 2 am. The darkness around him felt thick. He didn’t know if the feeling of being watched was from nocturnal animals that were just going about their nightly business in the forest, or if Kyle had already caught up to him. This bothered him as he walked feeling every bit of the alone that he was. Eventually he decided he didn’t care. He whiled away another half an hour. Soon though the feeling he had slowed down substantially gnawed at him. He needed to pick up the pace but the toes and bones of his foot ached. There was nothing he could do about it right now. He had to keep on moving. There was a clattering in the forest far in the distance behind him. He turned, looked over his shoulder, but saw nothing.

Kyle raised his snout to the canopy of the trees and let out an almighty scream that turned into a howl. The air shook around him and pushed the mist from him like a blast wave. Despite all the trees and undergrowth and their ability to muffle sounds, Kyle’s howl managed to carry on the wind.

Ryan took the GPS from his pocket and switched it on. He noticed he wasn't far from the place he had set up camp on the first night. This was good news. There was only seven miles to the hiker's lodge. A sound came from the forest that made his blood run cold. A screaming howl in the distance. It was far away but not far enough for his liking. He didn't realise how tight he was holding the GPS monitor until he heard it creak in his hand. Looking down he saw the two halves of plastic case had popped open along the edge of the unit. He set off walking and picked up the pace. As he did, he held the GPS in his hand and pressed the case together. There was a satisfying click as the two halves popped back into place. He switched it off and put it back in his pocket.

Kyle snorted the air. On top of the scent of human sweat and fear, there was a peculiar scent in the air. A sweet, synthetic, rubbery scent.

"Duct tape? What have you been fixing, Ryan?" he said.

He caught the scent of the boar. He looked around him and saw the foot and hoof prints. Ryan's went off in one direction and the boar's went another. He followed Ryan's over the edge of a hill. After that there was a large patch of disturbed ground.

"Oh Ryan. Are you hurt? Too bad there is no way out of this. I'm gonna grind your bones little English man," said Kyle.

He began to run quickly but silently through the trees. As he moved, he leapt up and pushed himself off the trunks of trees propelling himself at even higher

speeds. Soon the scent of sweat and exertion were heavy in the air.

Ryan felt he was being watched, and all his senses were on high alert. In spite of this he heard nothing. No snapping branches or rustling of the undergrowth. No animals stirred. It seemed to be just him, but he couldn't shake the feeling. After all he had seen over the past few days, he no longer knew if he could trust his senses and instincts. He kept walking. Soon another hour had passed, and he had travelled just two miles. As he walked, he noticed a mound between the trees to his left. He shone his flashlight on it and saw it was a group of tents. He quickly moved his light away, but he could already hear the whispers coming from inside. Then zips opening, the rustling of clothing and tent flaks. A flashlight beam searched around and shone on him, then another.

"Hey! What are you doing sneaking around in the dark?" said a man with a New Jersey accent from behind a flashlight beam.

"I'm not sneaking. I'm just hiking," said Ryan.

"Who the fuck hikes in the dark," said another man's voice from behind the other flashlight beam.

"Honestly, I'm just trying to catch up with some friends," said Ryan.

He could hear the lies in his own voice as it wavered nervously.

"Bullshit. Why the fuck did you shine your light on our tents then?" said the first man.

"Ok, ok. I'm trying to get away from a mad man. He threatened me. I'm trying to put as much distance between me and him as possible. Please, just let me go on my way," said Ryan.

“Hey! You stay where the fuck you are. I have a .45 pointed right at you. Maggy, Maggy?!” said the second voice.

“Yes?” said a woman’s voice.

“Call the cops, and the forest rangers. We’ve caught a thief, or a weirdo,” said the man’s voice.

“Yes, please call the cops,” said Ryan.

“You, shut the fuck up!” said the man.

A huge mass fell from high above the tents and landed on the first man. His light beam swung wildly as his screams echoed off the trees. Ryan heard the sounds of flesh tearing, and blood splashing. Then a gun shot, then two. He ran instinctively away down the trail. The screams were joined by the roar of a powerful beast. The screaming continued for so long he thought it would never end. The thing that was killing them was enjoying their suffering. It was obvious to Ryan now that the thing was Kyle, and he wanted him to know it.

The next hour was a frantic blur of dread fuelled running. Any doubt Kyle had been lying was firmly cast from Ryan’s mind. The threats he had made were entirely serious. Kyle was somewhere behind him or maybe in front of him. He didn’t know and he was not willing to stop to find out. When the adrenaline and fear began to subside a little, he checked his GPS. He was surprised to see he had ran five miles. Even more surprisingly he was still on the trail. There was only two miles between him and the Hiker’s Lodge. He was still hyped up on adrenaline, and the threat of Kyle was more than enough to spur him on. He set off running again. Pain surged through his foot but right now the most important thing was getting out of this forsaken forest. He checked his watch and saw it

was 5 am. The light was beginning to change. On the distant easterly horizon, the sun was rising. It shone its light out over the canopy of the trees above Ryan.

Through the trees, in the distance he could make out the different coloured wood that made up the Hiker's Lodge. he tried to run but all he could manage now was a jog. Stumbling the last few paces and emerged out beyond the treeline of the forest. There was a deep rumbling growl behind him. He turned and looked into the trees. Not even ten feet away from him, with only a few trees standing between them was a seven-foot tall, huge mass. Its eyes shone golden as they reflected the sunlight of the new day. Mist was expelled in blasts from its nostrils as its hot breath met the cold air. Its lips were pulled back from its long, serrated teeth. The neck and chest vibrated as a growl rumbled from deep within its body. The muscles of its shoulders and biceps rippled under the fur and flesh that covered its entire body. The powerful legs flexed as it tried to hold back from launching itself at him. This was an anger so severe he could have been injured by that alone.

“You get to live, this time,” Kyle growled. His voice was a deep and heavy rumble. Ryan fell onto his behind and scrambled back across the ground.

“Fuck! I was looking forwards to seeing what your insides look like,” said Kyle. Ryan got to his feet. His breath came in ragged pants as his heart almost beat out of his chest. He limped away towards the entrance of the hiker's cabin, pushed the door open and stepped inside.

At the reception stood a man and a woman dressed in hiking gear. They were talking and sharing a joke

over cups of coffee. The woman looked at Ryan as he stumbled through the door. Her expression became extremely serious. The man followed her gaze, and his expression became serious too.

“Oh my God, sir. What happened?” said the woman.

She ran around the counter to help him, followed by the man.

“Something huge was chasing me. I tripped and broke my arm and my toes. I think it was trying to eat me. I’ve been walking all night,” said Ryan.

“Shit buddy. Sit down here. We’ll get you sorted out,” said the man.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” said the woman.

“I’ll get you something to eat and drink,” said the man.

They both ran to different parts of the building, leaving Ryan sat in the chair feeling saved. He stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out towards the trees. The beast, Kyle, was still out there. His eyes caught Ryan’s gaze.

“I beat you, mother fucker. I won your stupid fucking game. Ryan one, Kyle zero,” said Ryan. There was a blur of movement and Kyle’s hand burst through the window. Its fingers wrapped around Ryan’s head and the claws dug into his flesh. Ryan felt his bladder let go and he pissed down his leg. With a swift pull he was dragged through the window and back into the forest. He was slammed against a tree and the hand around his head released and he fell to the floor. Before he could move and get his bearings the hand wrapped around his throat and lifted him again and pinned him against a tree. He strained to pull in a whistle of breath. He could hear

the voices of the man and woman calling out into the forest as they wondered where he had gone. The hand released enough to let him speak.

“You said I could go free if I got out of the forest,” he croaked.

“I lied,” said Kyle.

He pulled him away from the tree and threw him deeper into the forest. As Ryan hit the floor Kyle had already leapt after him. He opened his eyes and saw the beast falling towards him, then it landed on his legs. Ryan screamed in pain as the flesh and bones of his thighs were crushed. Kyle began to tear at the tape and clothing covering Ryan’s chest. He pulled the broken arm up and Ryan’s screams intensified. He released the limb, and it fell limply to the ground. He dug his fingers into the flesh of the man’s chest. In an act of defiance Ryan punched the beast across the snout. Kyle grabbed the hand and bit it. When he shoved it away the fingers were mangled, pointing in all directions, or hanging off. He then dug his claws into Ryan’s chest and pulled, tearing his ribcage open. Ryan’s screams became gasps of otherworldly pain.

“Hey, so that’s what they look like,” said Kyle. He shoved his snout into Ryan’s body, biting and tearing at his organs and viscera. Eating him while he was still alive.

The End.

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