

From “Map of My Escape” by Cheryl L. Reed

I had often wondered what it would be like to disappear. As a teenager, I read books like *Famous Female Fugitives* and pored over stories in my mother’s magazines about women who had committed crimes with their boyfriends and ran. They changed their names, plucked birthdates off gravestones of dead babies to obtain new Social Security cards, and created new lives. I was never curious about the men who disappeared. The FBI’s Most Wanted lists were full of men who’d eluded cops for years, only later to be discovered as the quiet loner next door. The women fugitives, though sparse in number, were seldom quiet. They married, raised kids, built careers. Sara Jane even joined the PTA, acted on stage, and made speeches before her state senate. They lived their new lives in public as if they were flaunting the authorities in plain sight. I admired their tenacity.

There had been times in my life when I desperately wanted to disappear, when I dreamed of slipping away from the present and starting over somewhere else under a new identity. The pull became stronger after forty-four of my classmates, including my brother, and five of our teachers were killed by a guy in combat boots re-enacting his favorite video game.

I remember that day vividly. We were all at an assembly in the gym. I was sitting somewhere in the middle of the bleachers—they were the old-fashioned, accordion kind that pull out from the wall. I was reading index cards, trying to memorize trigonometry theorems for a test. Principal Brown was at the podium talking, but it was all background noise until a loud crack resounded through the gym. The metal doors at the front of the gym—the only way in or out—opened and slammed shut. Everyone turned to look. Even Principal Brown stopped talking mid-sentence. Darren Wallack, a guy no one paid much attention to, was standing at the gym

entrance dressed like a Ninja warrior, a gun and ammo strapped across his chest, a rifle in his hands. He looked almost comical, except it wasn't Halloween.

Nancy Greene, a whisper of a girl with thick glasses and braces, let out a high-pitched squeal. She was his first victim. Then pandemonium struck. Everyone moved at once. People climbed over others, trying to get away. Some hunkered down, attempting to hide. The air smelled of desperation and fear. Everyone was screaming, panicking. The gun blasted, again and again, loud, sharp cracks, like a whip cutting the air.

I noticed a guy slide his feet in between the thin slats of the bleachers. Our eyes met. He hesitated, then offered me his hand. We climbed down the support scaffolding. A few others chose to hide beneath the bleachers, too. We spread out in clumps of two and three as if we were safer with space between us. The stranger and I crouched in the corner, peaking through the gaps of the bleachers watching as Darren fired continuously, swinging his rifle from left to right like some character he'd seen in a bad movie.

"He's going to kill us," I whispered. I couldn't breathe.

I'd never met this guy next to me, but his eyes were kind, reassuring. He was black. At our charter school, Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, and Whites didn't mix.

"It's going to be okay." He patted my back. He seemed so calm.

Through the crack in the bleachers, we could see our classmates scrambling back and forth across the basketball court, shrieking terrified screams. Darren stalked them, firing a barrage of bullets until they slumped to the floor. I looked away. I couldn't take it anymore.

Several rounds flew over our heads. "He's coming toward us," the guy said. "Get down."

I lay on my stomach on the cold floor, the stranger next to me, convinced we were about to die. I thought about my family, my mother and father, and my older brother, who had just

started college. And for a quick moment, I mourned for them. Then I thought about my younger brother, Ross. He was out there somewhere. I tried to remember where he was sitting. When was the last time I saw him?

“What is your name?” I whispered.

“What does it matter?”

“Because I don’t want my last minutes on earth to be spent with a complete stranger.”

“I’m Reece,” he said. “You’re Riley.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Everyone knows who you are.” He reached over and draped his arm across my back, his upper body forming a protective shield.

Darren’s boots stomped above our heads. Kids screamed, scuttled to get away. The gunfire sounded like firecrackers. I plugged my ears with my fingers. I couldn’t bear to hear it anymore. If Darren came down under the bleachers, we were dead. There was nowhere to run. It was the most horrifying fifteen minutes of my life.

Then the footsteps stopped.

We didn’t know if we could come out. We heard hard footfalls, police hollering as they hunted down Darren. It seemed like we were huddled down there for hours. When the police announced it was over, we walked out from under the bleachers like horror movie zombies.

That’s when we saw them.

Bodies were sprawled on the bleachers. They covered the gym floor, piled in some places. I recognized many of their faces, kids I saw in literature class or passed in the hallway. I stepped around them, my sneakers sticky with blood, looking for friends, anyone I knew. Then I recognized his mousey brown hair. His face looked serene as if he were taking a nap. He was

wearing his new White Sox jacket with black sleeves and white on the torso. Our parents had given it to him for his birthday two weeks earlier. He only took it off to go to bed. Now the white part was ruby red. And my brother was never going to wake up.

For years afterwards, I dreamed about disappearing. Just up and walking out of my life—what was left of it. I hadn't thought about my fugitive fascination in a long time. Of course, now it's much harder to evade police in a digital age when a person's every movement can be tracked. But I didn't consider any of that the day I ran after shooting Reece.

Running is the natural reaction—even if you do not know where you are running to. The adrenaline and animalistic self-preservation kick in, leaving your brain a scrambled mess while your body takes over.

I drove in a daze, focused on the yellow line that I hoped would lead to a better future. Running from the cops is challenging for a normal person. But when you're an activist and your mug shot is floating on police and FBI computers, vanishing is a lot harder. We are all electronic files, avatars moving from screen to screen, followed by one entity after another.

I had to jump off those screens. That meant no electronics of any kind—no phones, no GPS, no computers. If I wanted to escape, I had to do it old school, like the women in the *Famous Female Fugitives*.

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