

Jaxson Shaffer

## **A Pause I Didn't Know I Needed**

A pause I didn't know I needed came on a humid Saturday afternoon, standing behind a splintered wooden barrier, with a paint splattered mask fogging up my vision. Until that moment, paintball had been nothing more than noise, running, shouting, firing, and endless loops of adrenaline pumping. I had joined the game expecting chaos and competition, not reflection. Yet it was in the quiet, between two bursts of gunfire, that I learned something important about myself, something I had been too busy to notice before now.

The day started like most weekends, rushed! I had woken up late, thrown on clothes, and hurried to meet my friends at the field. My head was full of small worries; homework I hadn't finished, a text I hadn't replied to, the constant pressure to keep up with everyone else. Paintball was supposed to be an escape, a way to burn off stress. I didn't realize how tightly I was carrying all that stress until the game forced me to slow down.

The first round was pure chaos. Paintballs whistled through the air like angry insects. Teammates yelled directions that blended in with outside noises that created static in my head. I sprinted without thinking, heart hammering, and barely aware of where I was going. I fired wildly, more focused on not getting hit than a real strategy to the game. Then, a bright yellow splatter exploded across my sleeve...I barely reacted, I just moved on, already chasing the burst of action.

By the third round, exhaustion crept in. My breathing grew heavy, and my legs burned. I slid behind a wooden wall and crouched down, waiting for an opening to run. For the first time all day, there was a lull; no shots nearby, no shouting, just the faint sound of wind in the trees and the soft tapping of paintballs hitting distant barriers. In that quiet moment, I lifted my mask slightly and took a slow breath. It lasted maybe ten seconds, but it felt longer. My heartbeat slowed enough that I could feel it instead of fighting it. I noticed how tense my shoulders were, how clenched my jaw had been all morning. I realized I hadn't taken a single deep breath since the game started or maybe since the day started.

In that still moment, something simple became clear, I was always rushing; not just in paintball, but in everything. I rushed through homework, through conversations, through meals. Even my own thoughts moved too fast, skipping from one thing to the next. I treated every moment like a race, as if slowing down meant falling behind.

But there, hidden behind a paint streaked wall, I saw the field differently. Sunlight filtered through the trees, catching dust in the air. My teammates weren't just voices anymore; they were people I trusted, and people depending on me. The game wasn't only about winning, it was about being present.

When the shooting started again, I didn't jump up right away. I waited, I listened, I watched how the others moved, how my teammates signaled without speaking. For the first time, I played with intent instead of panic. I aimed carefully, I moved when it mattered, I wasn't faster, but I was smarter.