

Jonathan Green

Leave No Trace

I'm at a carnival of invasive plants, red and yellow berries everywhere like tiny circus balloons. Foster is sitting by the shed where Elijah brought us to help him pull plants once.

"Interesting venue," I tell him.

"Yeah," he says.

"Any reason we're here?"

He looks embarrassed and shrugs. "Thought it might feel a little spiritual, you know, given everything."

"Like the ghost of Elijah's spirit might come grace us?"

"This ain't Passover." I forget that Foster is studying theology now.

We sit and pass our palms over the gravel and feel for smooth stones, and when we find a nice flat one we turn it over in our hands for a bit, and then we skip it over the pond. They used to fly farther when the water was calm, but now that it's open to the bay they die out quicker.

"Your brother suggested it," Foster says.

I turn to look at him.

"He thinks we should talk about shit more, and that playing video games instead of talking is a crutch. Guess he's gonna be a shrink or something."

"You guys talk?"

"A little."

We skip a few more stones until there aren't any more flat ones within reach. I toss one or two bad ones that sink off the first skip.

"So what else do you and Dr. Mason talk about?"

"Quantum physics, mostly."

I nod. We sit silently.

“So, is this the part where we’re supposed to be all open and honest and shit?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. “We discuss our insecurities about how fleeting life is because we’ve seen someone close to us die.”

“Which makes us fearful at first, but then we talk about it and—”

“—And we realize that we both have the same fears, which gives us comfort, and ultimately strengthens our friendship.”

“And in the end, we come out of our hardship stronger than ever,” he says. “And we realize that we can’t change the pains of our past, but we learn that we can still move forward, together. And then they play a Coldplay song.”

“Who’s they?”

“You know, them,” he says. He looks down and kicks around some gravel.

I look over at the plants, and I look over at the breach. I can feel his eyes following mine.

The old shed has paint peeling off in long strips like white birch bark. The roof splintered. The door cracked open.

“Think those vices are still in there?”

“Doubt anyone has touched them since we did,” he says.

I get up and he follows me over. I stick my foot in the doorway where it’s cracked open, and he helps me pull the door. There are spiders everywhere. We find the vice tools and pull one out each and walk over towards Elijah’s old patch of bittersweets.

We don’t say a word, we don’t agree on what we’re doing, we don’t coordinate, we just do it. We start pulling plants, and we get into a silent rhythm. We go for a while, maybe an hour, hard to say. The sun makes its way up the horizon, it lights up the plants, the vines, the berries.

We keep working, pulling and cutting, and at the end of the path, we spot a group of people in dark green shirts walking towards us. We look up and I think, well that’s it. Here come the rangers.

And slowly these four women, these two men, in their forest green shirts and

khaki pants, make their way over and walk right past us without saying a word, and they keep walking to the shed. They grab some vices and join us. For the first time in who knows how long, we're cutting back. We're doing work. Even that weird dude from the community forum is here, still wearing flip-flops and a stained wrinkled shirt.

"So, now do you feel all spiritual?" I ask.

We share a moment staring out at these invasive plants. Plants that have no business being here, had no say in being here, but are here because someone else brought them, and they endured.

Foster takes a long deep breath and tastes the air. He turns slowly towards me and says, "Hell nah." And he smiles. And I smile back.

Leave No Trace is what the Boy Scouts taught us. Leave everything just the way it ever was. Invasive plants spread like wildfire, leave them. Climate slowly changing, leave it. Boys only, don't change a thing. Show up, camp out, and clean up so no one will know you were ever there.

But right now, I feel like doing something, and that's all there is to it. Me and Foster, and Elijah too, we're going to let people know that we were here. We're going to make our mark.

Past the bittersweets, along the shore and all around the water are the Phragmites. Phragmites and cattails as far as the eye can see. They're golden in the sunlight—not golden like gold, but golden brown like a sun-kissed teddy bear, a better richer color. Alive.

The slow stream of the tide, the gentle sliding sidelong wind. It really is beautiful. It's something to see. I've missed it for so long. And I wish he was here to see it.