

Eyes that Said Don't Leave Me Here

by J.M. Whalen

The train tracks were kind of hard to walk on. Little kids could step from plank to plank, and adults could hit every other, but at twelve, they were spaced wrong. Sometimes it seemed easier to just balance on the rail as I went, but Zach was bad at that, so I didn't do it now.

We were following them from my house to his, with a short walk through the woods at his end. Following the street would have been quicker, but on the tracks we could throw rocks at trees and carry knives to feel tough—not that we ever saw anyone back there.

The only time was one day when we'd gone to jump off the trestle and kids from the grade above were already there, spearing sticks into the mud like a tiger trap. The sticks were hard to see beneath the water, and we never ended up jumping there again.

Those guys scared me more than they did Zach. Once, the day after I'd been knocked down and kicked a few times on the way home from soccer practice, Zach picked a fight with one of them at recess and got suspended. I never asked him about it, but I heard he threw a few punches and came out on top. He was big for our grade.

Today, we talked about ATVs, pellet guns, and how to make a good fist, and we kicked rotting leaf piles out of the ditch. Some of them belched up candy wrappers and chew tins, like the prizes hidden in a King's Cake.

I was looking forward to camping at Zach's house. Sometimes we'd steal Bud Heavies, Playboys, and other supplies from his Dad's shop across the yard and start fires in the pit out back. Once, we made torches soaked in everything in the shop that said "flammable" on the container, but the fumes were so bad I puked.

This time, Zach was carrying some model rocket engines that his sister's boyfriend had bought for us. Chris was ok. He even offered

Zach and me weed sometimes, but I could never tell if he was serious about it. I was carrying some snacks and a cheap tent.

I preferred sharing Zach's bed to camping in the yard, but it was quieter to sneak through the lawn at night than out of his bedroom window and across the roof—we'd gotten caught like that, once. When we'd gone to climb back in, his dad had screwed Zach's window shut, screws sticking out everywhere and the glass cracked, and we knew that the next morning would be bad. His shop was his fucking livelihood, he'd snarl, spit coming out. Zach missed two days of school, and he looked like smeared shit after.

Today, we had no proper rocket to launch, but it would be fun to just light off a bunch of engines at once and try to get a shoe into the air or something. It usually turned sketchy when we did it without real rockets, like that G.I. Joe jet pack we made that lit a bush on fire, but I guess that was our style. His dad would never notice a few missing zip-ties.

We turned to the right just before the graffiti trees, pushing into the trail that led to Zach's yard. New branches were trying to knit up the opening from its edges on inward, like spears of frost on a windowpane or threads of skin around a wound. Zach walked in front, snapping the slender growths and bending the strong ones.

It was getting hard to see by the time we neared his house, but the lawn looked funny. There was always shit in it, but this time it was Zach's shit. Shit that was supposed to be hidden in his room: a pile of pocket knives; a couple of his dad's old Playboys; some flattened beer cans we'd never known how to get rid of; a pair of bolt cutters; that fucking potato cannon; a glass pipe, like the one Chris had.

We looked at each other from the edge of the woods, and Zach took out his knife and unfolded it. He looked down at his thigh and cut it open where the cargo shorts ended.

"It doesn't even hurt," he said, looking at the injury, blood coming out like red syrup.

I took out my knife and did the same. It was my first time, so I didn't know to use the edge, instead of the point, and I had to push pretty hard. It did hurt. The blood felt hot on my skin.

I guess Zach did it to prove he was tough enough to handle what was coming, tough enough to walk back into the house that had shaped him and let it shape him again. I must have done it to show solidarity, though I wish now I could have expressed the feeling another way.

I reached out, and Zach handed me the bag of rocket engines without saying anything, looking at me with eyes that said goodbye, or something like it.

I shouldered the stuff we still had and nodded, knowing that the night would be bad for him, knowing that my own parents wouldn't say anything when our basement door opened and closed, as long as they didn't see my leg. I'd have to wear pants in the heat next week, I considered.

Zach walked up to the house and threw his knife, open and bloody, into the pile where the others were. I wiped mine clean on my calf, closed it, and followed the tracks back home. It was dark by then, but the rails shined in the moonlight, so it wasn't bad.

