

18: Wilderness

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Inside every one of us is the strength to let go of everything we've known and step into something new, a truth gleaned from a summer spent on beaches and forests. I was shaken awake by my father, it was a Saturday, six-in-the morning. I could hardly hear him talking, but his whisper was the only thing awake in the darkness of my room. He told me to get ready to go to the airport. A sense of urgency in his voice. I got dressed and in a few minutes we were pulling out of our driveway and heading to the airport. It took about an hour, but when we finally arrived and made it into the lobby, he handed me a ticket. Seattle. I asked him why we were going to Washington, as I had a big show for theater later that day, I didn't get a straight answer but he assured me we would make it back before the afternoon. I was too tired to think it through, so I believed him. We made it onto the plane, and once we had buckled in and taken off he dropped the bomb. My father tells me that I am done with school, I don't need to take any finals or do anymore work, I am going to a wilderness program where I will live in the woods for a little while. I had thought he meant in a cabin, somewhere distant, where I could find my head again. He was quite literal. After we landed, I was introduced to two of the guides who would be leading the wilderness program, Emma and Michael.

So here I am with the knowledge that I am going to live in the woods for an indefinite amount of time, in the hands of two stranger. A pregnant lady and bearded man, the latter of whose face was bright red and eyes wide. The way they smiled and talked made them seem like the stereotypical over-enthusiastic cheesy camp counselor. I don't remember the last thing I said to my dad. Maybe I didn't say anything. I was supposed to feel betrayed, but I didn't. I felt excited. I wanted this. I wanted to escape my own gray existence and live with the bare minimum. I wanted to make memories. My dad handed me a bag with boots, socks, and underwear and left to catch his flight back home. The two guides walked me through the airport to their van. The rest of the day was spent driving to pick up the rest of the group we would be backpacking with.

We finally met up with the group after what felt like hours of driving. There were five of them, and my first thought was that they smelled like hot dogs.

They looked dirty, had a tinge of black to them, and walked with a hunch due to the weight of their packs, but despite what might seem like grim conditions, they all radiated a feeling of joy. A pure joy to be alive. It was overwhelming. We enjoyed a lunch of PB&J's and introductions, and headed off to our next trailhead. Once we were there I was given my own pack, filled with everything I would need for my stay in the woods, and headed off down the trail. It wasn't a long walk to the first campsite. We arrived within a few minutes, set up camp and started a fire.

It's not hard to say that that night was the beginning of the greatest time of my life. Over the next few weeks, I would become close to my group. They would become the family I didn't know was possible. I would open up the darkest sides of myself to these people and they would accept me rather than cast me out, and that was something new, something we all need. Someone to accept us, raw and whole. Someone to cry upon without feeling judged or misunderstood. A connection. Something I didn't find until I was eighteen. It took me eighteen years to find that love we all deserve, need. It also took me eighteen years to discover nature. Until my time in wilderness, nature wasn't something anyone truly appreciated. Richard Louv actually summed it up perfectly when he said, "We are telling our kids that nature is in the past and it probably doesn't count anymore, the future is in electronics, the Boogeyman is in the woods, and playing outdoors is probably illicit and possibly illegal." I used to wake up sad. I had no idea why, I just felt heavy, the world seemed small and pointless. Something I'm sure a lot of kids my age can relate to. I never knew that the entire time nature was the answer, the idea simply never occurred to me.

Those nine and half weeks weren't great because I was away from my family, they were great because I'd found myself. I was given the time and space and support I needed, that I never knew I needed. I discovered my own ability and strength, I found the world that humans were adapted to live in, not the one created for ourselves. I left the program with a love for myself, not ego, but a sort of self-love and confidence that I'd never had before, but everyone can have. That's what made this time the greatest time of my life, and if it were up to me, I would send everyone to wilderness, this world would do well with a little bit of self-love.

Justin Case is an eighteen-year old senior at Oak Creek Ranch School in Sedona, Arizona. He will attend Northern Arizona University in the fall. Currently, he's conquering his fears one at a time, serenading bystanders with a ukulele. This is his first writing appearance.