

My Red Hot Cape Cod Summer

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The traffic clears just after we cross the Bourne Bridge, so dad accelerates the car, and mom slides down her windows and shouts, “We’re heeeere.”

My spell checker just red-lined “heeeere” because I put four “e”s between the “h” and the “r”, which is not the correct spelling of the adverb “here.” However, mom pronounced the word with a lot of extra “e”s. My account of this summer must be accurate, but my spelling must also be accurate. So many conflicts.

Dad is determined to make it from our home in Acadia, Ohio to Cape Cod without stopping at “a God-damned motel,” but mom got home late from her job yesterday, so dad had to pull into a Holiday Inn Express a little outside of Albany at 10:45 because “those bastards charge you extra if you check in after 11:00.” I sleep in the same bed as dad, while mom is all alone in her bed.

At 5:00 the next morning, dad shouts at us all to get out of bed and “hit the road,” which is an idiom. While he was in the bathroom, I took the bible from the desk drawer and slid it inside my astronomy book. Stealing would ordinarily be extremely unethical, but a note on the bible urged visitors to “Take it home.” Clear-cut—not a paradox.

At home, I am allowed to look at porn, and have looked at so much of it that it now strikes me as colossally boring. I am also permitted to drink alcohol within the house, but it tastes

terrible. I am permitted marijuana within the house, but it scares me, so I only ever ate one gummy bear. I am not permitted religion at my house or elsewhere because it is “a God-damned cosmic con job,” according to dad. The phrase “Don’t bring God into our house” is crocheted on a throw pillow on our sofa.

As we cross the Massachusetts/New York frontier, I start to read the bible, hoping to find some clarity about various ethical dilemmas, but I am bored and confused by Mile Marker 6, so I leave it in the men’s room at the next rest stop.

We get to Uncle Dave’s house at approximately 10:57 that morning, the tires crackling against the pebbles in the driveway. “If Dave is so God-damned rich,” Dad fumed, yanking off his seatbelt, “how come he can’t afford asphalt?”

Uncle Dave runs an HVAC business in Philadelphia. People like to feel warm when it is cold outside, and cold when it is warm outside, so Uncle Dave is rich. Dad is a history teacher at Acadia Middle School. People don’t like dates and facts, so Dad is not rich.

Aunt Delilah walks out to our car and says, “You’re here,” with one “e” between the “h” and the “r”. She smiles at me and gives me a hug.

“C’mon,” Mark, my cousin, says. “Let’s pick bunks. I want the top.” We go to our room in the “unfinished” part of the house. He watches as I stack my books in alphabetical order by author, at the foot of the lower bunk.

“Don’t worry. I’d never touch your books,” Mark says.

Mark is eleven and three quarters and I am fifteen and an eighth. He is my best friend.

“Wanna play ping-pong?” he asks. There’s a table approximately six feet from our bunk bed.

I haven’t played since last summer. I don’t have anyone to play with in Acadia.

We grab paddles. Mark's grown a few inches since last summer. His serve is much better than last year, but fifteen will always beat eleven. It's testosterone. Also, I'm big. Plus, I've got superior hand-eye coordination.

Mark is a good loser, but he is not a loser. He's tall for his age and a good athlete like his father, Uncle Dave, who played tight end at Boston College and, according to my mom, "was friends with all of the Fluties." I Googled "friends with all the Fluties" but didn't get a cohesive answer.

Anyway, my mom explained that Mark doesn't mind losing to me because he admires me, which confused me tremendously.

We played for one hour and forty-eight minutes. Fifteen always beats eleven, unless fifteen lets eleven win, which I did and it made Mark so happy that I did it again, which is when Mark told me to, "Quit it."

Is letting someone win a form of lying? This is a very complicated ethical issue. On one hand, letting Mark win was dishonest. On the other hand, it made Mark temporarily very happy. I am guessing that the bible ultimately sorts out ethical dilemmas like this one, assuming the narrator is reliable. When I find another bible, I will look up the issue of letting someone win. The bible is an old book, and old books generally have good indexes.

"Let's get something to eat," Mark says. So, we go downstairs where Uncle Dave and Dad are arguing about something, but the argument stops as soon as we walk into the room.

Aunt Delilah asks if we'd like a sandwich. This question makes me anxious. Dad is a "strict" vegetarian. Uncle Dave eats a lot of pig and cow meat. A "sandwich" could fall into the vegetarian category, the meat category, or the ambiguous fish category. I ponder the ideal sandwich—a utilitarian combination that would please the greatest number of people.

“You know what,” Aunt Delilah eventually says, “I bet we have some of that peanut butter you liked so much last year.”

“Teddie Brand,” I say. “It has a bear on the label and a fat to protein ratio of 2 to 1.”

Aunt Delilah puts on a pair of glasses and studies the label. “Yes. That’s right. Your mind is just so remarkable, Ethan. How do you remember things like that?”

I like Aunt Delilah very much. I wish she and my mom were staying on Cape Cod and my dad was going to Europe with Uncle Dave. But, Aunt Delilah and Uncle Dave are going to France tomorrow, while my family stays on Cape Cod to help take care of Mark. “The trip will be lost on Dave,” my dad said during the car ride to Cape Cod. “Dave has the cultural perspective of a troglodyte. He doesn’t even know how to say Hello in French.” I point out that French provides multiple ways to say “Hello.” For some reason, this angers dad.

The first few times I ate Teddie Brand peanut butter, I thought it tasted bland. Mark explained that Teddie Brand doesn’t add sugar. It turns out that the sugar is so overwhelming in other peanut butter brands that it masks all the other tastes. Like, in porn, if a woman is totally naked, it masks everything else. A totally naked woman could wear clown makeup on her face and you wouldn’t notice. But if the primary and secondary sex parts are covered up, then you notice all sorts of things—like her hair and her eyes and whether she’s smiling or nice or mean or whether she’d like you or maybe kiss you. Anyway, because there’s no sugar in Teddie, I began to notice the actual taste of the peanuts. Cool phenomenon, huh? Once I realized that, I could never look at naked people and peanut butter the same way.

During sandwich eating, Dad and Uncle Dave yell at each other.

Google would be so much better if it could just explain their arguments to me. Once, I asked Mom, but she told me that they were “inexplicable” and “irreconcilable.” I find them “irritating.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Mark says.

We head out the back door, the sound of the argument trailing to nothingness. It’s funny, though, because we know that the argument is still going on even though the sound waves have become too diffuse to form a coherent signal.

“I hate it when they fight,” Mark says.

I nod, which means that I agree with what Mark says.

Back in Acadia, we read a novel in Ms. Walker’s English class that contained multiple logical lapses. She explained that the narrator was “unreliable.” That made no sense to me. Why would anyone want an unreliable anything? I must record my red hot Cape Cod summer honestly and accurately.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Mark asks me.

“I do not,” I reply, “but I would like one.”

“I have one,” Mark says.

This is surprising because Mark’s voice hasn’t started changing and his chin is still very smooth.

“Her name is Elizabeth, but I call her Liz,” Mark says.

“Have you had sex with Elizabeth/Liz?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” he says. “But we kissed once.”

“What was it like?” I ask.

“It was the best second of my life,” Mark answers.

Each day consists of 86,400 seconds. First order approximations, that’s about 6×10^5 seconds per week, and about 3×10^7 seconds per year. A kiss must be truly exceptional to stand out amongst all those other seconds.

At the beach, we take off our shirts. A few people are in the water; a few are on the sand. I study the water. Waves are incredibly fascinating. I imagine the moment at which each big wave was born--when flat water lifts up and gradually transforms into a wave. The sound of the waves intersecting the sand comforts me. I fall asleep.

When I wake up, we are surrounded by four boys roughly my age.

"Hello," I say, sitting up.

"Look at the white-skinned dork," one of them says. The others laugh, and it is a strange laugh, which is not easily classifiable.

"Yes," I say. "I am white-skinned, like my mom. I believe it's a recessive trait. My dad's skin is much darker." I did not comment on the "dork" part.

One of the boys shoves Mark and he topples over.

"Why did you shove my best friend?" I ask, standing up very quickly.

The boy who shoved Mark shoves me, and I fall down. It was on sand, so no injury, but still an unpleasant surprise. More importantly, Mark has started to cry.

"The dork's best friend is crying," one of the other boy's says.

The shover pushes me again. Another boy has knelt down right behind my knees, so I topple over backwards. Even more unpleasant.

Back in Acadia, a boy slugged me, so I slugged him back and broke his nose. Dad was so mad at me that he wouldn't let me read books for two weeks.

I ask Mark what I should do.

"Beat the shit out of them," he sobs.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I don't want to break anybody's nose again."

While I'm considering the various conflicting forces, another boy—not the shover or the kneeler—punches me in the stomach. It catches me off guard and it hurts, knocking all of the rationality out of me. So I punch that boy in the stomach. He collapses to the sand and moans.

The shover comes at me again. Before his hands reach me, I grab his fingers and twist them. He yelps in pain. Then, I pick him up and hurl him face first into the sand.

The kneeler stands up. Mark positions himself behind the kneeler's knees.

"Oh, I get it," I say, and then give the kneeler a sharp shove. He goes flying over Mark's back. While he's down, Mark gives that boy two sharp kicks in the ribs.

A lifeguard appears. "No fighting on my beach," he says quietly. "Leave now."

"They started it," Mark yells.

"I know," the lifeguard says. "I saw the whole thing. I'm just getting you away from here. They're assholes."

"Are you okay?" I ask Mark while we walk on the trail back to his parents' beach house. This is an all-purpose question Mom taught me to ask when I am unsure what to say.

Mark laughs. It is an unclassifiable laugh—not the kind of laugh when something is funny. "How did you learn to do that?" he asks.

I mainly learn things by reading. Last year, I read 259 books, including six on self-defense. Mainly though, I am much stronger than the other boys because of genetics and weightlifting.

"You threw that guy like a football," Mark said, doing that funny laugh that isn't really a laugh.

"A good football throw requires a spiral. I threw him more like I was tossing the caber," I explain, recalling a book on Scottish games that I read two years ago.

"That might have been the second-best second in my life," Mark says.

The next two days are rainy, so Mark and I play a lot of ping-pong. Mark gets a lot better. A lot. He wins a game.

“Did you let me win?” he asks.

I tell him that I did not, but I now better understand the damage inflicted by letting Mark win a few days before. It is better to be accurate and truthful. But yet, sometimes it is not. Mark asked me whether a pimple was forming on his cheek. Is it really better to be truthful?

We read a lot. I read three books during this period: one on astronomy, one on meteorology, and one on oceanography. The first is above average, the second average, and the third below average. The law of averages is confirmed, at least for $N=3$. Comforting.

Mark is reading a fiction book about football. I don't like fiction because fiction is made up, but Mark likes his book, so I become curious. While Mark watches a baseball game, I sneak his book into the bathroom and read it, and it turns out to cover many ethical issues, including:

- Is it right to take steroids if that would help the team? Utilitarianism issue.
- What if a receiver knows that he didn't catch the ball, but the referee called it a catch?
Ethical quandary.
- Should the halfback ask Isabella (who is pretty, but mean) or Mirabelle (who is not pretty, but nice) to the prom? Social problem—very challenging.

On the third day of rain, my mom takes me with her for a trip to “get a little fresh air,” which makes no sense to me because fresh air is available nearly everywhere without getting in a polluting car. Mom sighs and explains that “fresh air” is an idiom. Oh. I am generally getting better at recognizing idioms. Then Mom says, “Maybe you've been cooped up (idiom!) too long.”

So, we go “into town” (which is apparently an idiom referring to two blocks of stores, three white churches, and a tiny patch of lawn with a single bench). Mom takes us to an art gallery.

Some art galleries contain accurate pictures, showing portraits that look exactly like the actual people do in real life. This art gallery has pictures of boats that look nothing like real boats.

“These pictures are examples of impressionism,” my mom explains. She is an English teacher at Acadia High School, but she knows a lot of other things beyond literature. “It is the artists’ impression of what something is really like.”

“But these pictures aren’t accurate,” says another voice in the art gallery.

“Exactly,” I say.

“Good art should accurately represent the subject,” says the other voice, which belongs to a girl about my age. Her eyes are blue like the ocean (even though the ocean in the paintings is pink).

I look at her and she looks at me. It is intensely exciting.

Then, her mother yells at her to “move along and stop bothering people.”

“See you,” the girl says, as her mother grabs her hand and yanks her out of the gallery.

The girl was fully dressed, so this was what I noticed about her:

- She is tall.
- She seems very nice.
- I can still see her smile at me when I close my eyes.
- Maybe she likes me?

I am unable to speak for the remainder of the day. It turns out that eleven *can* easily beat fifteen at ping-pong when fifteen is distracted.

“What are you going to do?” Mark asks me over strawberries and yogurt for breakfast.

“About that girl?”

“What should I do?” I ask Mark. “Where do I find her? What do I say to her when I find her?”

“I’ve seen her around before. I think she’s one of the summer people, like us. Sooner or later, all the summer people go to the beach.”

Mark and I go to the beach the next three days, but she doesn’t show up.

“Are you sure everyone goes to the beach?” I ask.

“Yes,” Mark says.

The fourth day is drizzly. Mark stays at home to read my astronomy book. He has developed an interest in the planets. I go to the beach by myself. I don’t mind the rain. Lying in the rain is like swimming for people who don’t swim. I fall asleep, thinking of her. When I blink my eyes open, she is there.

“I come to the beach on rainy days,” she tells me.

I nod. “Fewer people.”

“Exactly,” she agrees.

“Are we dating?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says.

This is the best second of my life!

“Let’s walk by the water for our first date,” she says.

We exchange names. Her name is Esmeralda. My name is Ethan.

“If we were in the same class and they seated everyone alphabetically by first name, then we’d sit next to each other,” she says.

“Yes,” I agree. “Very likely. Although, what if you were at the end of one row? Then, I’d be at the start of the next row, and we’d be far away from each other.”

She stops walking. “You are a deep thinker, Ethan. But, if you were an even deeper thinker, you would have come to the art gallery, which is where I’ve been waiting for you the last three days.”

Being in love has made me pretty dumb. "That makes sense," I agree.

She looks at her watch and says, "I must go. My parents are very strict. I can only be away for ninety minutes at a time."

"What happens now?" I ask.

She says, "On a first date, a couple waves goodbye to each other."

We wave. The moment is simultaneously very happy and very sad, which is an unsettling paradox. We agree to meet in front of the art gallery the next day.

When I get home, I tell Mark everything.

"I'm not certain about the waving part," he says.

Real-life dating appears to comprise a broad set of unwritten rules. In porn, love happens very quickly, often within seconds of a pizza being delivered. Still, porn is fiction, and fiction is made up.

The next day, Mark and I ride bikes to town early. I am very nervous, so I ask Mark to be "nearby, but not too nearby. At least 25 meters away, but no more than 50 meters away." He understands. He sits on a bench in the little town green, wedged between a church and a store, reading my astronomy book.

Esmeralda arrives. She is fully dressed and she looks very pretty and very nice.

First, we go into the used bookstore and discuss literature and comic books--two subjects she knows a lot about. Then, we go into the kite store, but neither of us know anything about kites, so we leave immediately.

"This marks the end of our second date," Esmeralda says.

But I want to spend every second with her.

"What happens now?" I ask.

"We kiss," she says.

I am paralyzed. I cannot breathe. I cannot think. I am frozen as she leans toward me, awaiting the best second of my life. But before our lips intersect, Mark screams my name.

The boys who attacked us at the beach have encircled Mark. Dilemma! I excuse myself from Esmeralda and run over to Mark.

“The dork is here,” the leader says. He takes a knife out of his pocket and shows it to me.

“What do we do?” I ask Mark. He is crying, so I don’t get an answer.

Esmeralda joins us. Now there are three of us. We are like The Avengers!

“What is going on?” she asks. “I’m confused.”

“Revenge,” says the leader.

“For what?” Esmeralda says. “Revenge implies an antecedent.”

The boys pause for some reason. Then, the leader shows his knife again, which scares Mark.

The old woman who owns the kite shop comes outside. She takes a puff of a cigarette and says, “Let me get this straight—are you four idiots bullying a child half your size and two clearly autistic teenagers? Is that what’s going on? Because if it is, then you four are an embarrassment to bullies everywhere.”

A siren blares. Two police officers appear. The kite shop owner summarizes the kerfuffle and notes that one of the boys “brandished a knife.”

The police separate us all and ask us many questions. As always, I give a faithful account. Parents are called. Esmeralda’s mother takes her away. My parents take me and Mark away. My dad shouts a lot.

As punishment for punching a boy, throwing another boy, tripping a third boy at the beach, and for not telling my parents about it, Mark and I must stay on the grounds of the house for the remainder of the trip. We protest, but my father refuses our appeals.

I finish reading my eighteen remaining books too quickly. Mark and I play so much ping-pong that it gets colossally boring like too much porn.

I am miserable. I was so close to the best second of my life. Each day, I text Esmeralda, but she doesn't text me back.

Dating is very confusing. "Is she angry with me?" I ask Mark. He doesn't know.

Uncle Dave and Aunt Delilah eventually return from their trip to France. Uncle Dave has not learned how to say any of the forms of "Hello" in French, but he has learned how to say *C'est combien*, which means *How much is this?*

Mark is glad to see his parents, but he is sad that I am leaving tomorrow. I am very sad to leave Mark, but I am much sadder that I didn't get to see Esmeralda again.

After packing up, I sit on the front porch and read Uncle Dave's suspense novel, which he planned to read on the plane ride home but fell asleep while the plane was still taxiing. It is about a spy who goes to Russia and pretends to be Russian in order to infiltrate the KGB. It is colossally boring, so I fall asleep.

When I wake up, I am not alone.

"Hello, Ethan," Esmeralda says.

"I texted you," I say.

"My mother took away my phone as punishment for lying to her," Esmeralda says.

"Lying?"

"I didn't tell her about you, and she considers that lying," Esmeralda says.

"Is omission really lying?" I ask.

"It is not," she says.

I *think* that a case could be made for either position, but I say, "Exactly!" because I have learned a lot this summer.

Esmeralda says, "I've been riding my bike on every street in this town in 90-minute increments, searching for you. I've passed by your street three times during the last two weeks until I saw you sleeping just now."

"I was grounded," I explain.

"Yes, I heard your father shout that at you," she said.

"Yes. He does that a lot," I concur.

She looks at her watch. "I need to return home," she says, putting her bike helmet on.

"Good bye, Ethan."

She pedals away and I realize that I'll never see her again. This is the saddest thought of all time.

Suddenly, she squeezes her brakes, throws her bike to the ground, and runs back to the front porch, where she gives me the best second of my life.