

For the past 11 years, at the end of August, my entire family has come together for a two week reunion in the Cape. On the first night we arrive, we play a game that has been a tradition for generations. It's called "Murder in the Dark" but it's only fun if you say the name with an accent and drag out the word 'Murder' for as long as possible. The game entails every light in the house being off, and everyone, ages 4-76 hides in the most creative place they can find. In the past I have always liked to hide alone, scoping out the perfect spot hours in advance, however this summer my four year old cousin asked to hide with me just as the game was beginning. Begrudgingly, I said yes, and had to think up a new hiding place on the spot. As we ran to the closet behind the kitchen she reached up and grabbed my hand. During those six minutes we spent together, crammed in the closet with the brooms, mops, and dustpans, trying not to giggle as my uncle 'fpi-fhi-fpho-fhumped' down the hall it

dawned on me that this may have been the last time I would ever play ‘Murder in the Dark’; because there was a very real possibility come this time next year I would be in a dorm room meeting my roommate, or in a classroom meeting new teachers, friends, and advisors. When this realization first hit me, my initial reaction was distress, I suddenly felt old, like I was running out of time. However, as those six minutes passed, I thought about the next 13 days we had to spend together, and rather than mope around the house and count down the days until I could potentially leave forever, I decided to make this the most memorable summer ever.

I began thinking about my past, and the ways in which my family has shaped me into the person I am and will be in the future. The majority of the time, I take my family for granted, assuming that they will always be there to listen and laugh with

me. However as the summer began to fade into the past I cherished each moment spent with my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents because I knew that it was not a guarantee that I would be given another summer with them. So as the days went on, and my nine year old cousin decided to do my makeup for me which resulted in eyeliner smeared so heavy on my eyes I looked like I'd been punched; and my thirteen year old cousin demanded we go out on the sunfish together only to discover neither of us knew how to sail it once we were in the middle of the bay, I didn't take a moment for granted. I knew that all of these trivial events added up to memories that will last me a lifetime. So as I sat at the dinner table each night, listening to my grandfather tell stories with such vigor you would think we were the first people he had ever told the story too, even though he recited the same stories every year, I embraced it. Rather than blocking out my grandfathers energetic tale and thinking about

what my plans were for the night, I absorbed every word of his story, making sure I would remember it for years to come. There is no promise that there will be a next year; there is no way to know that my entire family will be reunited to reminisce on the year that has passed and the one that is to come.

As the summer drew to a close, I packed with more mixed emotions than I have ever experienced. It was the definition of a bitter-sweet moment. I knew I had soaked up every experience over the past two weeks to their fullest; even waking up once at 7 a.m. to join my ten cousins for breakfast with my grandfather at Holly Berries. But I felt as if I had lost out every summer leading up to this one. Every time I went out with friends rather than staying in for family dinners, or I slept through Friday morning French toast, I lost a moment which was irreplaceable; I missed a memory I could not afford to take for granted. So

when I drove back to my small town, I applied the lesson I had learned on the cape to every aspect of my life. I didn't say no to my four year old brother when he asked me to read him a bed time book. When my sister asked to watch a movie, I said yes, and when my brother needed a ride to football, I offered to bring him. I will always wake up at 10 o'clock on the first Saturday of the month and go to Mel's, the greasy yet absolutely delicious diner down the street, with my four closest friends. However, rather than spending the other three Saturday mornings on the month wrapped in my covers while my family eats my mom's famous eggs, I've decided I will be a part of those memories.

Because, although friends are important, family is irreplaceable, and they are the people who have been there for you in the past, are there for you in the present, and will be there in the future, and the memories you built with them are the ones that will last forever.

FINAL

Last summer, as our caravan of eighteen people crammed into five cars came barreling down the dirt road no wider than a bike path, and I got my first glimpse of the sun shimmering off the clear water which surrounds the quirky shingle house we rent each year, I felt the energy in my parents' car turn to pure exhilaration. As my sister waved to my cousins in the car behind us, and I listened to my mom plan all the things she would need for our family dinner, I began to wonder if this was going to be the last summer I would spend with my entire family. As we rushed out of the cars and began to unpack our clothing, put all the hotdog and hamburgers into the refrigerator, and stack the sandcastle building equipment on the beach, I thought about all the memories we had compiled over the past seven summers together on Cape Cod.

That night after our first dinner, as is tradition, my entire family gathered around the kitchen table to go over the rules to a family game we have played for generations. The game is called "Murder in the Dark," but it's only fun if you say the name with an accent and drag out the word "murder" for as long as possible. The game entails every light in the house being off, and everyone, ages four to seventy-six, hiding in the most creative place they can find.

I have always liked hiding alone, however, this time I didn't get that luxury due to the fact that my five and six year old cousins asked to hide with me moments before the game began. I grabbed my cousins' hands to guide them to the kitchen closet. We scampered through the

pitch black house, and when I heard my uncle fee-phi-fo-fum down the hall, I hurled my two little cousins into the closet.

As we sat in silence next to the broom and dustpan, with my cousins' curly blonde hair tickling my arm, I began thinking about my family and the ways in which they have shaped me into the person I am. I thought about my aunt, who has the craziest personality I've ever encountered, and how she always laughs louder than everyone else at the table. Then my uncle came to mind, and I thought about all the times I'd watched him sit on the beach with my dad and enthusiastically start a heated political debate. The subtle parallels between my family and me emerge in different ways every day. My friends always make fun of me for laughing just a little bit too hard when someone tells a joke, and when I have an opinion on something, it's a rare occasion when I'm willing to compromise my beliefs.

Suddenly, my little brother came running into the closet. He nuzzled in between me and my cousins and groped the pitch-black floor until he found my hand to squeeze. I started to think about my parents and the many ways they have influenced me. Possibly the most significant thing they have taught me is the importance of an education. Neither of my parents attended college, and if you ask either one of them what their biggest regret is, they will tell you in a heartbeat that it was not furthering their education. My parents taught me that an education is more than just getting an A on a project. Each summer as my dad and I sit at the beach or take a ride on the boat, we inevitably talk about school. We talk about which classes I'm looking forward to taking next year, my favorite subject, English, and most importantly he tells me how proud he is of me for taking my education seriously.

While I listened to my little brother and cousins bicker, I remembered the massive family dinner we had had that night. It began, as family dinners always do, with my grandfather telling

stories with such vigor you would think we were the first people he had ever told the story to, and as I listened to my grandfather, I thought about how much he has taught me. He has more friends than anyone I have ever known, and he has showed me time and time again that friendships are a crucial part of life. But more importantly than that, he has taught me to be strong. When my grandmother died several years ago, my grandfather was the keystone in a crumbling bridge. My entire family was falling apart, but he managed to not only compose himself, but the rest of us as well. So that night as he had wrapped up his story, and everyone at the table repeated the same comments they had made the last time he told it, I asked him to tell another one. His ability to put emphasis on every word he says, and the way he makes every silly story connect back to our lives, is a quality I am still trying to emulate.

Just as my younger cousins and little brother had reached their melting point, my uncle came bursting through the door and shouted, “Found you!” Everyone else emerged from under the beds and behind the couches, the lights came back on, and our shingle house was once again transformed into a glistening reflection rippling on the dark ocean. My family gathered back in the kitchen to talk about all the ridiculous hiding spots people had found. I watched my exuberant cousins, my laughing parents, my smiling aunts and uncles, my loving grandparents, and I thought about how well we all mesh together. Every time the eighteen of us huddle around the campfire on the beach, or have a family race to see who can swim to our neighbors dock the fastest, I see little pieces of my family reflected in myself. At the end of the two weeks, as we packed our bags, loaded up the cars, and made our way down the dirt road, I looked back upon our stay on the Cape and cherished the fact that the essence of who I am comes from my family.