

Math Camp

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Math Camp was supposed to be different. I certainly was not going to repeat last summer's disastrous month at Judo Camp. The brochure promised that I would learn self-defense and build self-confidence. Instead, my daily beatings continued, but with the added consent and encouragement of the camp's staff. At least I got plenty of practice in curling into a fetal position. Math Camp was supposed to be different; there, I would be respected and revered for my ability to solve first-order differential equations at age 15. People would push and shove to watch me integrate expressions. Math Camp was supposed to be different, but not half an hour after my mother kissed me goodbye, I was standing with my back to a wall, silently watching kids aged 10–17 run back and forth, greeting their friends and introducing themselves to each other. I sighed.

After we received our cabin assignments and unpacked our stuff, a counselor cheerfully told us that there would be no classes on the first day, and instead we would play some games outside. We assembled on the field where we broke into teams for, as if anyone needed to guess, dodgeball. Kids, of course, are the craftiest of Earth's creatures, and thus had no difficulty spotting me in the crowd; soon enough, in a roar of Darwinistic bloodlust, a red rubber ball screamed toward me and into my cheek, sending my glasses skyward and me to the ground. In my daze, I faintly heard someone exclaim, "Awesome shot, Derek!" I groggily grasped for my glasses and crawled to the "out" area, where I lied face-down on the grass for the rest of the afternoon.

That evening, the entire camp was gathered in the log-cabin auditorium for a "Meet the Staff" assembly. The campers were calm, drained by the afternoon's activities and sedated by stomachfuls of "Welcome to Camp" spaghetti and meatballs. My stomach had been not-quite filled with "Welcome to Camp" bread sticks and water, in an effort to avoid the painful allergic reaction that would have inevitably followed the slightest consumption of tomato sauce. I was sitting in the front row, about six feet from the stage, carefully scrutinizing the industrial grade carpet at my feet when the head counselor stepped up to the podium and began his welcome speech. I didn't listen to a word, of course; a similar speech last summer turned out to be terribly misleading, and failed to mention the sadistic seventh-graders obsessed with destroying me.

Instead, I examined the counselor-instructors that were seated in a row behind the podium. As I scanned their faces from left to right, I only found two that were interesting enough to make me pause. The first was a guy who looked sort of like a cross between a howler monkey and a mackerel. He had really big ears, puffy cheeks, and bulging eyes that didn't seem to blink quite as often as they should. "*Alouatta scombrus insularis*," I joked to myself. I also noticed a girl seated toward the right, between two Ivy-League types. Indeed, I more than noticed her—I became transfixed by her. She dressed as though she were the result of high-speed particles of personality from each of the last five decades colliding and fusing into one: burgundy saddle shoes, a light green knee-length skirt with a weird Indian design, a worn-out 3/4 sleeve tee shirt with a faded Atari logo, and

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a pair of silver-blue cat eye glasses. She sat with her knees together and feet a bit apart with her toes pointing at each other, carefully listening to the speaker—I assumed so, anyway; it was impossible to tell for sure, since her eyes were hidden by the reflection in her lenses. I imagined that if I could see them, they would have been big and attentive, which in my mind matched her shoulder-length dark hair and fair skin, colored by an inexplicable blush. I watched her absent-mindedly rub the hem of her skirt, remove badly-behaved strands of hair from her mouth and scrunch up her nose when her glasses slid down, and would never have stopped if she hadn't stood up with the other counselors. They took turns stepping to the podium to introduce themselves and announce which class they were teaching. I glared resentfully at them.

"Hi," she said as she stepped toward the microphone, waving to no one in particular, "I'm Lissa and I'll be teaching Calculus II." Calculus II. I gulped. Good thing I hadn't planned on learning anything new, I thought to myself.

The following morning, I woke up late. Actually, I woke up right on time, but had to spend some extra minutes getting up, since my cabin mates thought it might be a good idea to duct-tape me to the bed. So after spending forty-five minutes or so freeing myself, I quickly got dressed, cleaned up and ran toward the cafeteria. Halfway there, I had to stop to catch my breath. I took a moment to glance across the field next to the path and saw Lissa leading a small group of teenagers into the wooded area. I took a final gasp for air and ran across the field toward them.

I arrived at "Classroom 'E'" (which was not a room at all; it was a clearing with several rows of log benches and a portable chalkboard) just as she was beginning to introduce herself. I collapsed on the far left of the first log-bench, panting like a dying beagle. Stopping in mid-sentence, she turned toward me and smiled.

"Hi Jason, glad you made it okay." I barely heard her. In fact, I barely heard anything at all, and I was seeing red. Suddenly, Classroom 'E' went dark and I felt my head hit the top of someone's shoe.

I awoke with a dull headache, aggravated by the florescent lamp that I found myself staring directly at. I blinked a couple of times and tried to sit up, but felt dizzy and changed my mind. "Welcome back," said a voice near my feet. Lissa was seated cross-legged on a bench next to the table I was lying on, reading a thick textbook. She got up and handed me a glass of orange juice. "Drink this, you'll feel better." I took a few gulps and sighed.

"Why am I in the cafeteria?"

"The nurse's office was locked. I think she took the day off for her girlfriend's birthday or something." She wrinkled her nose. "Are you okay? What happened?"

I thought a few moments. "I guess I haven't eaten in a while." She pouted her lips slightly, but didn't respond. Instead, she pushed her book up the table toward my shoulder and sat down in front of it.

"You ought to rest some more," she said and returned to her book. For the next forty minutes or so, the only sound was of her turning pages. Finally I broke the silence.

"How did you know my name earlier?"

"You were famous around here even before you arrived," she said, looking up from her book and giving me a smile. "Everyone knows about

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the fifteen-year-old in Calculus II.” She paused. “Oh, and we also received a series of very memorable phone calls from your mother, complaining that we didn’t offer classes in discrete mathematics or linear algebra.” I grimaced. “It’s okay, my parents were like that too.”

“How did you make them stop?”

“They seemed satisfied when I was granted early admission to Carnegie Mellon once I graduate from high school.” She blushed a bit and looked down at her knees.

“Wow, how’d you manage that?”

“I’ve been a research apprentice at MU for a while—in number theory,” she added cautiously. I jolted myself into a sitting position. She looked a bit concerned, but didn’t say anything when it became clear that I wouldn’t faint. “Want to see what I’m working on?” I didn’t need to answer. She rummaged around in her bag and produced a sheet of paper, on which she started to write in purple ink; her handwriting was big and neat, and she dotted her letters with little circles. After she finished, I looked at the page: it was a short program written in Lisp. “Basically, it repeatedly sets n to $3n + 1$ if it’s odd, or $\frac{n}{2}$ if it’s even,” she explained. I nodded in agreement, even though my agreement made no difference whatsoever. This was math, after all. “Well,” she continued, “there’s a conjecture that this function will eventually return ‘1’ no matter what positive integer we start with... we’re trying to prove this is true.” My headache vanished. I started asking questions and she happily answered them.

We continued our conversation for the next couple of hours. I had some difficulty concentrating on anything, though. I got distracted from the Collatz Problem by the smell of her shimmering hair. When I was admiring her greenish-grey eyes through the side of her glasses, my attention was captured by our discussion of efficient algorithms for factoring large integers, and my mind wandered to the pale skin on her neck while we discussed Fermat’s Last Theorem. Mersenne primes chased away the inevitable thoughts of her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. My head was absolutely spinning.

Alas, we were eventually interrupted by a rampaging horde of hungry campers. They brought with them from the serving line big steaming bowls of tomato basil soup.

We spent as much time together as we could after that. During those three and a half weeks, we covered all sorts of topics in applied and theoretical mathematics. We even began to approach topics outside the perfect world of math: the seemingly unbounded expectations of our parents, our plans for the future, our childhood memories, and how neither of us had ever been on a date. I was more comfortable with Lissa than I had ever been with a human being. She didn’t complain when I dripped on her textbooks after being tossed in the creek; she held her nose and pretended not to mind the smell of the horse manure that my cabin mates used to fill my shoes; and when the campers noticed our ever-increasing time together and started to laugh and make kissing noises at us, she just smiled and blushed along with me.

At night, I would lie awake, imagining her naked body glowing in the dim light, and how her skin would feel under my fingertips, gently gliding down her sides. I imagined our legs entwined and our lips pressed tightly against each other’s while she writhed in ecstasy, like in the romance novels Mom keeps at the back of her bookshelf. I imagined us together for the rest

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of our lives, saving each other from loneliness and misunderstanding, and saving the world with our combined intellects. When the sun came up and my eyes were still wide open, I didn't feel at all tired. I couldn't conceive of being happier.

But sooner than we wanted to believe, we met for the last time. This meeting was different: there were no mandatory activities to separate us, and no campers to jeer at us. It was past midnight, and the camp was silent. We couldn't bare to let our previous hours together be our last, so we sneaked out of our cabins in our night clothes when everyone was asleep, and met at Classroom 'E.'

"Tarski's theorem states that the first-order theory of reals allows quantifier elimination," Lissa told me, but without the kinetic excitement of the past weeks. I couldn't muster any more enthusiasm than she, so we gave up and just sat on the grass with our backs against a log bench. I shivered a bit from the night air, so she let me wear her cardigan. The embroidered flowers didn't look right on me, but it didn't matter. She pulled my arm around her and leaned against me, with her head on my shoulder; I leaned back.

For some reason, kissing her seemed to me the most logical thing to do next; it was as obvious as the Contradiction Law. So I did: I kissed her on the eyebrow. She raised her gaze to mine and kissed me back, only she kissed my lips. It was not hard and passionate like I had imagined. Our lips barely touched, and even when they parted, our tongues almost imperceptibly pressed against each other. A kiss that delicate couldn't last forever, and thus out of necessity, it intensified. Lissa twisted around to better face me, and wrapped her arms around me, gently scraping the back of my neck with her fingernails. I pulled her lower lip in between mine and ran my tongue across it, and then she did the same. I couldn't touch the softness of her skin, but I felt the warmth of her body through her flannel nightgown. When I slid my hand up to the side of her breast, she didn't object, and when I moved to cup it, she pushed herself harder against me.

Our escalating passion had its effects on me. For one thing, I wasn't cold anymore; Lissa pulled the flowered cardigan off me and tossed it next to us, followed by my T-shirt. Also, my erection was unromantically poking at her thigh. She shifted a bit and broke our kiss. Her face was still close enough to mine that our noses touched. I looked through her glasses into her shimmering eyes while my brain whirred madly, trying to concoct something I could say that would make her feel as blissfully powerless in my presence as I felt in hers. Neither of us uttered a word. Without moving her eyes from mine, Lissa grasped at the soft material around her waist and collected it into a bunch, until half of her nightgown was scrunched up over her belly button. Then in a single motion, she pulled the gown up and over her head. My hand, as if of its own volition, extended toward Lissa's exposed chest. At the last moment, my brain intercepted the impulse, leaving my hand floating not a hair's width from her. I exhaled sharply and stared at my hand without expression, like I was intensely thinking; but I wasn't. I just stared, without really perceiving anything.

"It's okay," she whispered, plunging me back into awareness. I glanced up at her and she was attempting a comforting smile. Slowly, I relaxed and let my hand form to the shape of her breast. We leaned back into each other and our lips rejoined momentarily, then parted to kiss and nibble at our chins, jaws, and necks. The space between us diminished, and her

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breast now took the form of my palm. My free hand dropped down the side of her belly to her waist and with my thumb, I rubbed the elastic at the top of her panties. Lissa lowered her head, sliding her cheek against mine. I could feel her shallow breath tickling the hairs on my neck. Then, she shifted her weight onto the side of her hip and slid her panties down her legs and off of each foot. I raised my hips to push my shorts down, which Lissa helped remove completely. She straddled my legs and embraced me tightly, trapping my penis between our stomachs. We were both breathing hard now, so I didn't kiss her. Instead, I closed my eyes and pressed the side of my face to her shoulder while she slid up and down, massaging me with her belly. I groaned deep in my throat when I felt her cold fingers grasp my erection and guide it between her legs.

Her eyes were lightly closed and her lips were pressed together as she laid her hands on my each of my shoulders and lowered herself. I held my breath while I slid partly into her. She stopped when I felt resistance. We remained motionless as I listened to her rapid inhalations slow to a calm rhythm. "You have to do it," she finally breathed into my ear. I nodded against her neck, and she reclined on the grass while I crawled to my knees. I moved between her thighs, which squeezed against me, and put my hands on the ground next to her shoulders. It didn't feel right to hold myself over her like some possessive oaf, but the peaceful expression on her lips and in her eyes reassured me. So I once again pushed into her and met the same resistance. As gently as I could, I pushed forward; when her hymen broke, she winced, but didn't make a sound. I lowered my face to hers and our lips melted together in a long kiss while I withdrew slightly and then pushed back in. Not long later, I came; our lips were still pressed together while our tongues slid against each other. The pulsing heat in my groin dissipated as quickly as it had approached. When it was over, I lowered myself against Lissa, and we rolled onto our sides with our foreheads touching and our legs on top of one another's. Gradually, the world around us fizzled into nothingness.

We weren't awakened by the gentle warmth of the rising sun, but rather the impending threat of hypothermia from the early morning fog. After quickly dressing, we grasped hands tightly and made our way toward the cabins. By the time we reached Lissa's, tears were streaming down her face and a lump had found its way into my throat. We held each other as long as we could, her eyes moistening my shirt, until the sounds of the meal crew forced us apart. "Bye," I mouthed as she stepped inside her cabin and silently shut the door. That was the last I saw of her.

I ate breakfast alone in the corner of the cafeteria. Two hours later, my mom arrived to pick me up.

Now, I'm back at home, sitting at my desk, and desperately trying to save the last four weeks forever. I can already feel it fading away. Tomorrow I'll start high school, but it won't be any different. Peter and Scott will corner me before class and take my egg salad sandwich, and at lunch I'll get dumped into a trash can or pulled into the girls' bathroom. I'll leave school early to take classes at the community college, where everyone will pretend I don't exist. Math Camp was supposed to be different. And it was. Too bad life isn't math camp.