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Summer 2019

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Summer 2019

By *Samantha Hince*

Cousin Camp

I'm sitting on the patio, the backyard buzzing around me. Grandpa's guitar and my sister's ukulele accompany a small chorus singing "Take Me Home, Country Roads." Some of the boys toss a frisbee. The little ones take turns on the zip-line.

Two grandparents, three aunts, four uncles, sixteen cousins. Every summer we hold "Cousin Camp": several days of games, relay races, *Chopped*-style cooking competitions, and theatrical performances. As the second oldest cousin, I lead one of two teams locked in a (mostly) friendly rivalry. We are competitive, and no one likes to give up or give in. It can get tense, but through it all—both the victories and the tears—we learn problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. It's fun, and it's a highlight of the summer for each of us.

The past several years we were at my grandpa's house in North Carolina. We would spend hours fishing and rowing around on "the Pond." He's selling that house, though, so this year we are at my aunt's new place near Richmond. Sitting on 50 acres, the new house offers a fresh outlet for our creativity: our first project is a haunted house movie trailer. We play *Manhunt* and *Capture the Flag* in the woods, make tacos in the kitchen, and gather on the back patio in the cool summer twilight. It's a new location, but it gives me the same feeling of *belonging*. These are my people.

The adventures continue past Cousin Camp: we spend every other Thanksgiving in West Virginia, running family Turkey Trots, cheering our uncle's high school football team, and walking to the local grocery store. During the 2012 Olympic Games, we sat up past our bedtimes cheering on Michael Phelps and Gabby Douglas and then decided to hold the "Cousin Camp Olympics." Last year we filmed our own *Family's Got Talent*, featuring cringe-worthy acts and melodramatic judges. It's always an adventure.

It's not perfect. Sometimes it's an exercise in patience and self-control, and personal space has little-to-no meaning with twenty people staying in one house. The motto for this, "*Discover Your Indoor Voice*," says it all. But this is my family, and I love every minute with them. They know me, including my faults and weaknesses, and they love me anyway. When I'm with my cousins I can be myself, and I get to cheer them on. Whether we're celebrating birthdays and graduations or grieving painful losses, we do it together.

Church

I'm sitting at the table with my family, tears streaking my face. That morning, that Sunday in July, had been our last at our church. Even though I had seen it coming, it was hard to accept that the end was here.

I knew it was coming weeks ago, when my parents explained the situation and let each of us give our input before they made a decision. It's not that we wanted to leave our church and all our friends there.

I knew it back in February, when the new eldership team announced a "new" candidate—without mentioning that the candidate had previously resigned from the position.

The situation reaches back two years, in fact, to when both pastors had to leave the church, and the entire elder team resigned as a result. We had seen so many red flags, but when my family tried to ask questions, we were increasingly pushed away. In the end, when we felt we had to leave, the elders let us go. My youth group leaders, our family friends, they just watched us walk away. They didn't even try to stop us.

It hurt. I believe my parents made the right decision, but it was so hard. Our second home for ten years is gone. It's been slipping away—I saw it coming—but still, the memory tears at me like the thorns I ran into playing frisbee at youth group—the physical scar to add to the emotional scars of this summer.

I trust God has a plan. He always does. He had a plan when my family moved from Pennsylvania to Virginia; as an eight-year-old, being moved away from all my friends felt cruel, but if worked out. We found a church, a dance studio, a swim team, and a theater group; we met so many amazing people.

And now, looking back a few months later, was it worth it? If I could do it over again, and could stay in Pennsylvania, or find a different church, or leave when everything first began unraveling, would I? The answer is *no*, because it was absolutely worth it. Learning about and growing in my faith, meeting my best friend whose wedding I was later in, teaching the preschool class, having late-night conversations about God and His word and my sin and His grace—these things have made me the person I am today. What I learned and experienced at that church is exactly what is enabling me to survive this without losing my faith.

I know that Christ is working all things out for the good of those who trust Him. It's excruciating, but I believe God is working in this, teaching me lessons I didn't even know I needed to learn. I trust He will use it all for His glory and for my good. It won't ever be the same, but we will find a new church where we can serve and worship and learn in community with other believers.

This is hard, and I am weak. But I know a God who is loving and sovereign and who has me in His hand. I trust Him.

Swim Team

I'm standing on the stage at the Awards Banquet with the other coaches, looking at the sea of swimmers and families in the audience. Somewhere between the early morning meets and the games of Sharks and Minnows, this team became a family. Somewhere among the frigid water and layers upon layers of sunscreen, chlorine, and sweat, this place came to define summer for me. After seven years of swimming and six years of coaching, I cannot imagine summers spent anywhere else.

And yet, standing on this stage, I have this sense of dread—unless things magically work themselves out, this could be the end. Of what, exactly? The end of my family's time on the team: likely. The end of the team itself: possibly. The end of this team as the family I knew and loved: absolutely.

And what's so painful is that it was people who are part of this family that betrayed us—people we trusted. Taking advantage of high school and college kids is clearly wrong, but it's amazing how easily people can rationalize their decisions when it's not *their* college tuition, or *their* rent, or *their* car payments that are being affected.

And once again, there's the question of *was it worth it?* I still say *yes*. This summer was messy and frustrating and heartbreaking. But it was so difficult precisely *because* we had seven amazing years. One rough season doesn't change years of wonderful memories.

Those seven years on a team where hard work, sportsmanship, and character were emphasized above pure speed; where every swimmer was made to feel welcomed and accepted and cared for; where we cheered for each other and encouraged one another and had fun together—those seven years is exactly why my heart broke as I watched it falling apart. Those seven years—and the coaches, teammates, and parents I met along the way—helped me become the person I am today. They are the reason that, for as many reasons as there are for me to call it the worst summer ever, thinking about this summer still makes me smile.

As my friends and I go off to wherever life takes us next, we will forever remember our swim family and the memories we made.

This is not the end. This is only the beginning.

Road Trip

We're driving down Interstate 95, listening to Alison Krauss. *Now That I've Found You* is usually the last album my family puts on at the end of a long road trip. It's late May, and we're only a few days out from

the start of the swim season. The situation at church has been tense for a while, but things haven't yet come to a head. Cousin Camp will be in August. I'm excited about this summer, not yet aware of all the pain and heartbreak my family is going to experience.

Sitting in the back seat I remember the days on the beach, the bike rides, the ice cream. After two exhausting weeks of tech rehearsals and theatre performances, not to mention the relentless busyness of Northern Virginia, our time in South Carolina was relaxed, restful, and so needed.

On the way home, we stop for a night in Lumberton, NC. Most people have never heard of it, but somehow both my parents ended up teaching there after graduation. We see the apartment complex where they met when my mom moved in next door to my dad, the theatre downtown where they were dance partners in a community production of *Hello Dolly*, and the church where they were married.

On the last leg of the drive home, we decide not to put in a movie. Instead, we talk. We make lists together: lists of highlights from the trip, goals for the summer, movies to watch, books to read. We share and debate and laugh. And as a family, we came back rested and stronger and more together.

The Lord knew that none of us was prepared for this summer, and He knew the heartbreak it would bring. He knew that none of us could face it alone. But going into this summer, I had a family I loved and trusted. Even when my siblings drive me crazy, they are still some of my best friends. Like the sisters in *White Christmas*, "Those who've seen us/Know that not a thing could come between us." We helped each other through the summer, offering advice, a joke, or simply a listening ear.

Our parents were there every step of the way. When other adults in my life betrayed me, my parents were there to talk through it with me, to stand up for me, and to help me learn how to stand up for myself. They were there when the world was too much for me and I needed a shoulder to cry on.

Family

The communities we create appeal to us because they reflect the family we were designed to live in. Whether or not we were in a healthy family situation growing up, it's an experience we crave. As humans, we naturally long for this because we were created to live and thrive in community with others.

The "families" we find of friends, teammates, coworkers, or neighbors, each in some way reflect the family community that is fundamental to how we experience life. And while those communities are not easy to find, it's an amazing thing when people, sometimes from completely different backgrounds and walks of life, are able to bond and become a united family.

It's also true that humans are flawed. Nothing is perfect, and sometimes communities fall apart. The "families" that we trusted, maybe even put our identity in, might collapse, leaving us left hurt and disappointed. But that doesn't mean we give up. The families we are part of also become part of us. We are changed and molded and made who we are by those experiences. When life doesn't go as we planned—when people let us down and the foundations on which we had built our lives crumble beneath us—we can learn from those mistakes and become stronger because of it.

Without my family, this summer might have broken me, leaving me bitter and cynical. Together, though, we survived. The rest of our life falling apart, the rest of our "families" collapsing, it only brought us closer and made us stronger together. People may let you down and disappoint you, but *family* is forever.