

Evan Schipellite  
18 Clearwater Drive  
Plymouth, MA 02360  
( 774 ) – 283 – 3272  
Eshipellite@gmail.com

### The Coconut Conundrum

There's always a week in the summer when the rain swoops in announced, unpredictable by weather forecasts, interrupting some previous unbearable heat wave like the intermission in a really depressing play. And, it's not that we mind that change of weather, in fact, all of us really live for it, but it brings along the upsetting reality that when it's all said and done, we'll all go back to the scorching Californian temperatures that are only accompanied by the sky's occasional spit, which seldom ever reaches the pavement before it evaporates. But, when it does rain during that glorious week, that's when we thrive, that's when all the kids on the block seem to rise up and savor the taste and feel of that warm water surging from the heavens. It is one week when the woods behind Hannah's house evolve from a desolate ruin into a malleable and flowing water park in nature. It is one week when the air becomes cool, the sun retreats behind the clouds, and we bask in the freedom brought about by the grey skies and falling pellets of rain.

The woods are essentially composed of hills and ditches sporting the occasional dying tree or rotted log, and each summer the downpour serves to transform the broken branches into floating devices, the decaying stumps into miniature islands, and the entirety of that ecosystem soon becomes likened to a swamp that seems to spontaneously grow out of the dry and crisp land. The combination of the depth of the swamp and the fragile nature of the obstacles dispersed through the sludge-like waters creates an environment that is easy to get lost in and possibly life-threatening. But, as any group of neighborhood kids, we are certainly not discouraged by the

dangers, but instead, we find ourselves naturally drawn to the swamp in our curiosity and naivety, like dogs that, despite knowing the pain of a snake's bite, just can't help whacking it with their best paw, just to make sure the snake's still threatening.

But, Joey, was something else, he wasn't really interested in the rain. He didn't care for the water that accumulated in the woods. He wasn't too keen on involving himself with our so-called 'waterpark', and he certainly wasn't willing to voluntarily risk his life in what he called the "Coconut Conundrum". Joey was basically the new kid on the block, and having moved from New York several months earlier, Joey could only perceive us as surfers and hippies who desired nothing more than to live life to the extreme. Yet, Joey evidently knew little about California before traveling across the country, hence the "Coconut Conundrum" saying. This theory, somehow incorporating a dry drupe more commonly found in Hawaii and an intellectual word that is more likely to be said in New England, supposedly meant that we "people of California" are destined to live our lives like daredevils without concern for our futures or well-beings. When pressed further about the meaning of this 'conundrum', Joey would only respond by smugly saying, "It's a conundrum because you're risking your life for excitement, and inevitably, if you kill yourself in that search, you won't be able to find excitement, now would you?"

As a result of this snobbish attitude towards us 'coconuts', Joey quickly became the most commonly teased, but still the favorite member of our little squad. Whenever conversation was dull, directing potentially volatile questions at Joey served to create at least thirty minutes' worth of entertainment in the form of listening to Joey try to explain the world to us from his 'superior perspective'. We'd ask him things like, "Do they call it New England because you still serve the Queen there?", and naturally he'd turn all red in irritation and provide us with a lengthy lecture

detailing our intellectual deficiencies. These debates would break up into wars between Casey, Hannah, Kyle, and I against Joey. Sometimes one of us would side with Joey, but it was usually out of pity's sake to prevent him from giving up on the argument too early. Joey would usually quit the conversation eventually, storm back to his house, and reappear outside an hour later looking for us. Once we made ourselves obvious to him, he'd march right back to the group and pretend as if his previous display of anger never occurred. Perhaps for any other group of kids, Joey's antics would have been repelling, but as we had nothing better to do during that one week of rain, Joey provided us with a comical addition to the weeklong downpour.

During that week, the four of us would wait in Joey's front lawn, taking our positions in a line sitting upon Joey's rotting wooden fence. He hated that fence, but then again, he hated everything about California. He had probably expected carnival-styled piers, never-ending beaches, swaying palm trees, and attractive Hawaiian dancers, but unfortunately his parents had moved to the ocean-less part of California, crushing his delusions of what California should have been. Luckily, he found us to dispose his anger upon, and thankfully we found him to provide us with entertainment. The first day of that rainy week was actually the day we first met Joey. Holding quite a bit of curiosity about the new kid who moved into the neighborhood, we decided to go and invite him to go play with us on the obstacle courses in the water-filled woods.

It didn't take long before Joey came out of his home and marched straight across the yellow grass that was now being blessed with the newly falling rain. He was possibly wondering why four strange kids were sitting in his front lawn, but before we could convey our invitation he had already demanded our names, summarized his life story in the time span of fifteen minutes, and begun his unending stream of thought describing his hatred for just about anything in California that didn't meet his initial expectations. We politely listened for a short while, but

eventually we slipped away one by one, heading for the swamp, leaving Joey alone in his front yard, still muttering to himself and ventilating his disappointment with reality.

When we returned the next day, Joey promptly exited his front door and trudged across the muddy lawn to meet us at our perch. He carried a red, white, and blue umbrella this time, which made for a bizarre scene as he stood in front of a line of rugged, dirty, and soaked kids. He brandished his weapon of choice high above his head, as if we were supposed to envy him for hiding from the soothing rain. However, this time he seemed a bit more courteous, likely a result of his loneliness during the past evening when we were out playing in the woods. But, despite our invitation, he abruptly refused the proposal to visit the swamp, swiftly closed his umbrella in a vain effort to look cool, and marched back to his house while shouting out his own invitation to join him inside for warm and comforting shelter. Yet, this was our one week to play freely, so we had to decline his offer and leave him watching from his front window, no doubt disappointed and slightly puzzled about our obsession with the rain.

We didn't want to give up on him, and as we soon happily discovered, neither did he want to lose our possible friendship. He still didn't know many people in town, and perhaps for the first time in a long while, we were the first group of kids to make a persistent effort to befriend him. On the third day the streets had begun to flood, just enough so that when you jumped you could create a small splash wherever you landed. Joey wouldn't visit the swamp with us today, but after admitting his defeat in his previous attempt to avoid playing with us in the rain, Joey finally concurred to leaving his umbrella behind and allowing himself to become soaked in the middle of the street. Joey began talking about the snow in New York, but before he could describe anything mildly interesting Casey had already started a game of 'Water Tag' and proceeded to splash him. It's basically a game of tag where the person who is 'it' has to jump

and splash another player with their feet in order to tag them. Joey stopped talking, and after what seemed like several seconds of silence, he reached down to his pants that were now covered in muddy water and stared at them in disgust while his eyes seemed to narrow in anger.

And then, he jumped, but what caught us off guard and stunned us in place was the strange reality that he was now grinning. His leap was mighty, and his landing was like a bomb crashing into the ground, creating a surge that caught all of us in a splash that managed to cover the entirety of our pants. Even after he tagged us, we watched him in surprise and admiration, as the unpredictability of his actions forced us to recalculate our expectations of the future. And before any of us could respond, he smirked and shouted, "Come on now, you're all it, and it still won't do you any good. This is easy, we used to play a much better and more challenging version of this, but it was in the snow, at night, with heavy boots." As he finished his fighting words, Kyle made an attempt to land next to him, but Joey promptly spun out of the way, successfully dodging the splash and creating a safe distance between him and anyone else. We soon finished our game of 'Water Tag,' as even with our numbers we could not corner Joey. We moved onto other games, watching as Joey, driven by his desire to impress and retain superiority, mastered the rules, no longer bothered or concerned about the continuing downpour of rain.

I suppose, that's where our friendship with Joey truly began. From that day onward we'd meet with him in his front yard, allow him several moments to complain about California, and then proceed to contest him in several outdoor games. Despite his growing tolerance of the rainy weather, he still hated everything else about the surrounding area. He enjoyed going on about how lackluster his new home was in comparison to his old one in New York. He liked to tell us how he used to live in a four story mansion that was the size of the nearby public school. It apparently had a pool, a movie room, and bowling alley. He said he had several pets, all of which

were taken care of by hired staff who cooked the food and maintain the yard, a yard that was apparently the size of several football fields. But, as far as we were concerned, our yard consisted of the entire neighborhood and woods, which seemed to be much more exciting than the properly kept gardens of his mansion. When we asked him to tell us exactly why he hated our neighborhood so much, he said, "It's just, it's just... Everything here is so dry and dead most of the time. Sure, there's some rain now and then that changes things a little, but that doesn't change the fact that this place is so lifeless throughout the majority of the year. Maybe that's why you coconuts do the things you do, you're just so bored of there being, just, absolutely nothing."

Time was running short, and soon there were only a few days remaining before the rainy week would draw to a close and the heat wave would return. We had lived for this week of rain and the 'water park' that had formed in the woods, but now it was becoming evident that if we did not convince Joey soon, he would miss out on the opportunity to experience that fun. We believed that if we could at least bring Joey to our world for one day, it'd be enough to change his mind about the rain, about California, and about everything he hated. Before the week was through, we finally devised a plan to convince Joey to discard his sense of danger and try his hand at the obstacles in the swamp. Joey lived to impress us, so Kyle wove a story that would no doubt challenge Joey to convey his bravery by besting us in a game that would take place on the floating branches and the stump-islands. And so, on the last day before the dry season returned, Joey, Hannah, Casey, and I sat before Kyle as he began his tale.

It was a ghost story, one about a young girl who supposedly used to live nearby the woods. She was a swimmer, a girl who swam competitively, that is, until her parents moved to this town. Here, there was no beach, no pond, no pool, and very little rain. There was nowhere nearby for her to continue her sport, and the dry summer heat only seemed to mock her plight

further. Even worse, there were not that many other kids around, and she quickly became bored and lonely living in a town with little entertainment. She spent most of her time wandering around, often looking for trouble, simply as a method of distracting herself from her lonely nature. Her actions soon caused her to gain a reputation that encouraged the neighbors to constantly yell at her for simple misdemeanors, or at the very least, they'd simply ignore her when she tried to speak with them. Her wandering brought her to the woods, and although it was more desolate and barren than the rest of the town, it was devoid of the cruelty of the neighbors and therefore served as her refuge from that world. She admired the way the land flowed, the beautiful manner with which the woods molded into hills that created connected ditches that collected fallen sticks and yellow brush. The ditches formed in such a way that it appeared to her as a dried out and forgotten river. Naturally this sight served as the initial sparks of a project that would occupy the majority of her time for several weeks.

Stealing water from the hose, she attempted to carry buckets into the woods, depositing it into one of the ditches in order to create a small pool. Yet, despite her valiant efforts, the water evaporated before she could make any substantial progress, and all her efforts dissolved before the day ended. But, she didn't give up, she couldn't give up, it was the only thing that she really cared about accomplishing now. She didn't really have intentions of swimming in one of the small ditches in the woods; her project became more of an obsession. There wasn't much hope for a future in the town in terms of her aquatic skills or finding friends, but she felt that if she could manage to get the water to accumulate in the ditch, maybe that would prove that there was some hope. She needed more than her manual efforts to fill the ditch with water, she needed a miracle, and perhaps, that is what finally occurred.

Eventually, it rained on and off for a week, and most of the water slipped into the dry ground and disappeared without leaving an impression. However, her attempts to fill the ditch with water caused the soil within to become damp, causing any extra added rain to layer on the top of the soil, filling the ditch gradually until a small pool formed. The cloudy sky, cool breeze, and continued addition of buckets of water allowed the pool to grow until it formed a large pocket. Although the pool was not very wide, it was deep and relatively clear. And so, after months of working on her project, she finally had a chance to enter into her newly created pool. And, that's where this story takes a turn for the worst, as upon diving into the bottom of the pool, she got herself caught in the entangling of branches, brush, and vines that had collected at the bottom of the ditch. Without anyone supervising her, she drowned at the bottom of the ditch, and several days passed before the local police located her body. The mud in the pool caused the water to become murky, and therefore it was only after the summer heat returned and all the water evaporated that they found her dried up corpse at the bottom of that ditch, no evidence left of the water that once served as her obsession during those previous months.

At that point in the story Joey had started giving Kyle a baffled look, as if to say, "So, what does that have to do with anything?" And, almost directly responding to Joey's possible question, Kyle concluded his story by saying, "There's a legend, that when it rains enough for the ditches to fill up again, and if you visit the woods at night, there's a ditch." Joey, crossed his arms to try and suppress his external curiosity, and asked, "What about that ditch?" Kyle continued, "I've heard that you can locate her ditch, the one she died in, by the sight of bubbles rising to the top and the eerie glow of her pale skin at the bottom." Joey remained silent, not saying anything, partially expecting Kyle to continue talking, which he did. "So, since the ditches are going to dry up soon, I think tonight we should go and see if any of us can find her,



how about it Joey, do you think you have what it takes?" And, that was all we needed, Joey practically led us to the woods in his desperate determination to convey his bravery and be the first one to prove the legend to be true.

So, despite the fact that we wouldn't have time to show Joey the excitement of jumping between the islands or rowing around on the floating branches, and regardless of the reality that it was night time and the end of the rainy week was marked by only a few more hours, we had finally convinced Joey to experience the swamp area with us. It still seemed like an ambitious effort, but we hoped that after the game was done, Joey might possibly be more sympathetic towards our home and potentially express less hatred towards it. We marched as a group of five into the woods, trudging through the muck as we approached the waters. Joey was the only one who seemed to be taking the game seriously, as he carried a large flashlight by his side, along with a pair of goggles over his eyes to prevent the mud from blocking his vision. We agreed to spread out in a small radius, each of us examining a different part of the woods while utilizing Joey's flashlight as a beacon to return to before the night was over. Due to its blinding light, we restricted Joey's use of the flashlight until we were out of range, but even quite a distance away, it still existed as a distraction each time Joey spun around with it, lighting up the surrounding woods like a radar device on one of those old LED screens.

And then his flashlight stuttered for a second, the beam danced above his location briefly before it sank, slowly at first, but then the beam quickly faded away until it was only slightly visible, pointing horizontally and reflecting slightly off of a single distant tree. There were no sounds that accompanied the event, the air was no longer cool, the heat was returning, and the rainy week was now over. The ditches filled with water still remained, but the change in the warm atmosphere seemed to cause the air around the pools to reek of mold and decay. Those

same pools would likely evaporate completely by the next day, leaving no evidence of their existence behind, except for one key thing. We crowded around the pool, Casey, Kyle, and I, and stared down into the murky depths at the pale glowing aura that slowly rose from the waters, covered in blackened brush and twigs. Hannah stood partially immersed in the darkened water, climbing slowly up the muddy slope, joining our procession as we started to circle the ditch, now completely obscured except for the faint trail of bubbles that occasionally rose to the surface.

We remained silent, watching the bubbles float to the upwards, popping into the air in what seemed like random intervals. We couldn't see the bottom of the ditch, but we knew Joey was still there, the gradually increasing period between individual bubbles served to acknowledge this reality. And then, a final large burst exploded above the murky liquid, the bubbles ceased, and we halted our movement. I stood across the ditch from Hannah, and only a short distance behind her I could make out the form of the flashlight resting in the grass, its beam directing itself towards her backside, seemingly cutting through the both of us on its way to the tree. She was engulfed in light, a radiance which emphasized her yellow dry skin and her blackened empty eye sockets. Casey and Kyle were positioned to my left and right, and although they were not caught in the focus of the beam of light, I could still distinguish their white skin and their lifeless eyes, eyes that had yet to be worn away by the march of time and the unrelenting heat throughout the year. And my own hands, cracked, and fragile, I could see them clearly before me in the ray of light. And, if I had a mirror, I would likely be greeted by a spectacle similar to Hannah's entirety, lifeless eye sockets and a pale dead flesh.

Joey once said that the worse part about California was the fact that everything is so dry and dead. He said that our biggest problem was the fact that we were all bored, and therefore risking our lives in order to create some sense of excitement to occupy our time. He called this

the “Coconut Conundrum” because he said that it didn’t make sense to risk our lives if dying meant we wouldn’t be able to savor those thrills. I suppose that’s where Hannah proves his logic wrong, and I should know, since I was her first friend. Despite what Joey said, we can still have fun, one week each year. When the rain sweeps in for that week and engages the dry land in a conflict that temporarily brings about the mud of life, that’s when we can rise. That’s when we can play in the still pools in the woods, when we can dance in the flooding streets, when we can be free to roam the neighborhood in the search of things to quell our boredom. And, Hannah has taught us, that the only thing we really need to get by, to do away with our dull, dry, and lifeless existence, is the presence of just a little rain water and the opportunity to continue making new friends.

There are five of us now, Hannah, Kyle, Casey, Joey, and myself. Beneath a tree, we stare up at the sky at the darkening clouds and soak up the steady downpour of rain that has begun to descend from the heavens, once again bringing life to the world below. Each summer the dry season is interrupted by a brief interval of softly falling rain and cool breezes, like the welcomed intermission in a really depressing play. That glorious week of rain carries the hope that Hannah strived for, the hope of entertainment, of fun, of freedom, and of friendship. That blessing of rainwater allows us to thrive, to forever play together in puddles and pools that we were all previously denied in our lives. It is the one time of the year when the weather mysteriously seems to alter its nature, from the scorching temperatures to the comforting breezes. And, it’s not that we mind that change of weather, in fact, all of us really live for it. But, it will always bring along the upsetting reality that when it’s all said and done, when the rain lets up, when the sun returns to torment the land, when we are forced to give up the life blessing of the water, everything will go back to being so dull, boring, lifeless, and dry.