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Remember this Night

The neighbors might talk—but it will be worth it.

The teenage girl you live with, the younger one with the jutting chin who rarely smiles, is laughing at *America's Funniest Home Videos*. She giggles as a kitten falls off a window ledge onto the back of a large dog, as a small dog runs so fast it trips and flips over itself, and as a parakeet recites words that have to be bleeped out for the viewing audience. Your legs are so sweaty that it's painful to pull them from the stuffed chairs you have swung them over. With your hands you try to separate your skin, swollen with heat and sun, from the vinyl, but after a few inches you wince, fall back in the chair, and decide there's really no need to move again tonight.

Just as you are settling into the home videos marathon with its echoing canned laughter, the TV begins to flip through channels. A denture commercial with lush bubbles surfacing over pearly teeth...a group of young, happy people wearing McDonald's t-shirts and dancing in line...an old episode of *Sanford and Son*. The changing continues, as if a higher power is trying to decide what's best for you to watch this evening. Finally, the pixels coalesce into a staticky image of two uncommonly

attractive young people—male and female—and after one glance at the nonchalant grins of those faraway actors you've already divined the ending.

You and the girl are unmoving. Since neither of you comment on the fact that the television has changed its own channels, it's as if nothing has happened at all. Though you have only been in Guyana a little over a month, you've become accustomed to the shortage of options represented by just two television stations, one public, one private, both of which play mainly pirated shows from the United States. One evening you may be apprised of the weather in Tampa, and another you could see a live gospel concert from Dallas. The only things you can count on, really, are the local news broadcasts and a 4:00 P.M. daily showing of *Days of Our Lives*, the nation's favorite soap opera, which has spawned a generation of Guyanese children named Ashley and Alison. What you will watch tonight, however, is largely beyond your control, and this is a fact that you find strangely pleasing.

Sweat stipples your arms and legs, and for a moment you mourn the lack of air conditioning. You remember summer nights in Maryland and the whirring, icy breath on your forehead when you rested your face against the rumbling machine. The little plastic edge of the vent you bit against, causing the cold air to rush directly down your throat. Looking out the window at the dark, quiet streets as you sucked in the chill; these are some of your first memories of being alone as a child.

You allow yourself only a few minutes of self-pity tonight. It is true that you have never been hotter. That the relentless heat has inhabited and possessed your body in a way you could not have imagined before you arrived in this country. That your brain is fatigued by the heat, and your thoughts have frayed and gone soggy in the equally unmerciful humidity. But this is not the point. You look at

the girl guiltily. She has probably never felt air-conditioning. There is no life for her without this heat.

Your legs and ankles are festooned with little pink-red dots, marks of fresh mosquito penetration. Languidly you imagine an *America's Funniest Home Videos* about mosquitoes. Guyanese lore has it that if you pinch the skin around the mosquito stinger as it is biting you, it will be forced to keep sucking your blood and explode. That might make for a good episode. The mosquitoes are staying away tonight because the girl has lit several "coils," flat, dark green solid chemicals that create a force field of noxious smoke around which the mosquitoes dance. Ash dropping from the smoldering ember slowly recreates the spiral shapes on the ground in gray, druidic markings. The odor permeates your skin and clothes. Tonight, in bed, you will smell it in your hair.

There's a knock on the door. No one is home except you and the girl, the appointed guards of the house. You pause and listen. Shirley, the girl's stepmother and your host for the next few months, has warned you about opening the door for anyone. "Teefmen come anytime," she has said. Another knock on the door and you emerge from the protective smoke into a swarm of eager black specks that, despite your swatting hands, fill with your blood and fly away. Your blood, flying all over the room, perching on the doilies and crawling back into the dark places under the sofa.

Between the metal bar and frilly curtains, you catch a glimpse of white skin. Todd. Flushed cheeks, slightly upturned, freckled nose, a pink Oxford shirt, khaki pants. Your neighbor, another young volunteer who has, like you, just graduated from college. Every day you walk together through the pitted roads of Georgetown to the training center to sit with the twelve other volunteers and listen to lectures on sustainable development, cultural sensitivity,

and all the diseases you might contract while living in the tropics. You undo the many locks.

Todd looks wild-eyed, agitated. “Enid’s Christian music is driving me crazy. What are you doing?”

You slap your leg, flick off a carcass, rub the red spot. “Nothing. You know, watching TV.”

He comes into the house, and you lock the door immediately behind him. The girl had twisted in her chair briefly when Todd first appeared, but now she is chuckling again at the movie.

“Hey, Regina.”

“Hello, Todd,” from the back of her head.

He is rubbing his hands together nervously as he enters the house, which is crowded with furniture, rugs, stacks of telephone books, and piles of letters. He pushes the sweaty hair away from his head, surveying the room as if he’s surveying the whole country, uncertain how he ended up here. Enid is an elderly widow, a born-again, Pentecostal Christian who really wants Todd to become one too.

Regina is laughing out loud now, and her laugh is thin and high-pitched. She has a voice that sounds like it’s going to complain even when it isn’t. Shirley told me from the beginning that she’s “Uncle Reggie’s daughter,” born to another lighter-skinned, Portuguese woman during their marriage. Regina sometimes visits her birth mother on weekends, and returns saying nothing. While Shirley and Reggie have darker skin and call themselves “Afro-Guyanese,” Regina has a long face more reminiscent of Madeira than Nigeria, and a tangle of wild eyebrows.

You feel the tension coming off Todd in waves. You see him assessing the mold that creeps from the windows down the baby blue walls, the cracked figurines in the alcoves, the crush of furniture and heat and smoke in the room. You can almost feel his loneliness too, with its pungent whiff of despair. “It’s not the loneliness,” he’ll tell you later, “it’s the aloneness.” Though you don’t quite get

the distinction, you begin to get the sense that he wants you to help him solve this problem.

“Are y’all hungry?” he asks us after a few minutes of watching the gorgeous, grainy movie characters flirt. A few hours ago, Shirley had served you rice and curried chicken from a dented pot. You and the girl both nod.

“O.K., I’m going to call for a pizza,” he announces, as if this were a fine and honorable accomplishment. And, as if performing some kind of amazing circus trick, he adds, “and I think we should rent a movie, too. Anything.”

You begin to protest. You are volunteers here; you are guests. You are supposed to be “living at the level of the people,” you are supposed to be respectful of the resources of the country, you are supposed to be a model for sustainable development. You are supposed to take what you get, and be happy with less.

But Regina has already turned her head around. Her face, below her unkempt eyebrows, has changed. Her eyes are bright, and there is something like a faint smile on her face. Shirley is at a church meeting. Reggie is down the road playing dominoes. Nikki, the eighteen-year-old, is on a date with her forty-year old boyfriend, and Frankie, the older brother who comes and goes getting thinner and thinner, is out. The Americans are desperate, and now she’s going to be the only one around to eat their pizza.

Todd is moving toward the phone. Curried rice and chicken, *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. No options. To live with no options makes you feel noble, humbled to the situation. But Todd is not so settled with this arrangement. He’s tired of pretending that he has no money, that his parents back in rural Virginia aren’t well off, that he doesn’t own a Jeep Cherokee across an ocean and won’t be a lawyer in a few years anyway. This whole thing you’re doing depends on your ability to feign you don’t have access to luxuries—like air-conditioning—that Regina will never know. To endure the heat and mosquitoes when you

know that not so very far away your college friends are sipping cosmos and gyrating under strobe lights in Manhattan nightspots.

Regina watches you.

“O.K.,” you say, “go ahead.”

Todd picks up the little plastic phone and dials the five digits he’s memorized. Five numbers, you have realized, are much easier to remember than seven. The pizza place is new and brightly lit, located on the same circle where the city’s most famous church, the tallest wooden building in the world, stands. But it’s a tough market here on the tip of South America because the Guyanese do not eat pizza. This restaurant, like another Italian place where you will eat Thanksgiving dinner a few months later, is for people like you, people who are trickling in from Europe and the U.S. as the country opens up after decades of colonialism and dictatorship. But there are not enough of you, or you go home too quickly. Both places will be closed within the year.

“Yes, with pepperoni,” Todd is saying. “Yes, and extra tomatoes. Thirty minutes, O.K. Directions? Let me put someone else on.”

Regina comes to the phone and begins speaking with the most excitement you’ve ever heard in her voice. Her Creolese is so thick you only catch “up de back road,” “Cuffy monument,” “front house with cracked window.” They hang up. You are officially waiting for your pizza to be delivered.

Todd is on a roll now. “I’ll head down to the rum shop for sodas—why don’t you two get the movie?”

You have no desire to peel yourself from your sticky chair again, but he is insistent. Todd’s eyes are glistening with a kind of wild desperation you’ve never seen before. Then again you’ve only known him a month. Time has telescoped since you arrived here, and you often forget that

your new friends—Todd—and your family—Regina—are essentially strangers.

You know Todd to be sheepish, reserved, making everyone laugh with his deadpan humor. He's polite, Southern, and he often looks down when he speaks. But tonight, tonight he is staring at you with manic hazel eyes, his thin hair plastered to his forehead like one possessed. *This night is going to be different*, he seems to be saying. *We are going to remember this night.*

Regina is happily along for the ride. She slides her feet into her plastic sandals and goes to wait by the door. Todd has already departed on his quest for sodas, thrusting a 500 Guyana dollar bill into your hand as he rushes out. As you leave, you will lock the door tightly and pray that the "teefmen" don't decide to show up in your absence. Shirley has had this house for fifty years and it's crammed with possessions from brightly painted cement wall to cement wall. To your jaundiced eye, much of it looks old and broken, but still you would feel terrible if any of it disappeared forever into the Guyana night. You leave the television on as a precaution, as if intruders might be kept at bay by scripted American wisecracks and meaningful sidelong glances.

It's a short walk around the corner to the small video store. The night is starry and loud, men slamming dominoes down at the rum shop, babies crying, packs of dogs roaming the street, barking at nothing and each other. You can see Regina's face silhouetted in the moonlight, placid, unspeaking. You talk to fill the silence, asking her about her school, about Nikki's boyfriend George, about Shirley's church. She nods, or answers in a few words. You don't know if she's just shy or if she dislikes you, or if she is so excited by the pizza and movie she can't speak. You worry that you are too talkative and too foreign, and that you will never be accepted by this girl and, by association, her country where you are to live for the next two years.

Then, suddenly, she slips her small warm hand into yours. You walk the rest of the way to the movie store afraid to breathe too hard because maybe the hand will fly back. But she does not move it.

There are a few hundred videos packed into the tiny store lit by a dangling bare bulb. The girl behind the counter is twirling her hair extensions and watching the same romantic comedy playing on your TV back at Shirley's. Dub music superstars are plastered on the walls: Petra, with bati-rider jeans perched on the top of her thighs, leers at you over her shoulder, while Beenie Man seems to thrust his pelvis right out of the poster. You think how unlike the characters in the American movie these Caribbean stars are, how bland and goofily uncertain the Americans seem compared with these brazen performers. You hope that by the time you leave this country, you will have absorbed some of this confidence and sheen.

It turns out Regina loves horror movies. She picks up several boxes showing people with axes jammed in their skulls, but you shake your head. Your suggestions of dramas and romances, even adventures, are greeted with solemn, silent disapproval. Finally, you compromise on *The Shining*, which both you and certainly Todd have seen before. You pay the equivalent of a two-week average Guyanese salary to become a member of the store, the girl writing your name in careful script on a little hand-printed cardboard card.

At home, Todd is prostrate on the stoop with the cold sodas pressed against his head and neck, an open one tipped precariously against his stomach. Back inside, you light more mosquito coils and turn up the fan so that smoke billows and gusts through the room. It has been half an hour, maybe more, since the call and you realize that you did not leave your number with the man who took the order. Georgetown is a city with few street signs, lit only by occasional guttering bulbs, and it's easy to imagine your

driver—and your pizza—lost on the winding, unpaved roads.

Even though you were not that interested in the pizza to begin with, even though pizza sounded like a foreign and unwelcome intrusion to your night, the thought of it never arriving strikes panic in your heart. Not for you, you tell yourself—you'll be fine. But Todd. You look at him, swatting obsessively at his ankles, trying to focus on the television Americans. He is not all right. He's on the edge, talking more and more about going home to the States and to his dog Faulkner, a black lab puppy who just broke his leg. Talking about not knowing why he's here, not knowing how he'll make it. He is depressed and he is confused. He needs pizza.

Finally, you hear a car on the dirt road. It rumbles past the bonfires of trash wafting sweet smoke, past the cemetery with its gravestones sinking into the waterlogged ground, past where the neighbors' many roosters wander in the road all day. Halting in front of the house in front of yours, its lights shine brighter than anything else on the street. Walking over the planks to the road, you appreciate the fact that the delivery car is unmarked, that it looks like hundreds of other white Toyota Camrys that cruise the streets of Georgetown, white being the color used cars are painted when they are imported, refurbished and resold. It could be a taxi, or a friend coming to visit. When the telltale flat white box is delivered through the window, however, you know the neighbors will begin talking.

But you forget: it is telltale only to you. The neighbors have never seen pizza delivered before; they have never tasted it. This delivery may as well be from another solar system, an alien handing over its mouthwatering intergalactic offering. When you give the driver the exorbitant amount of cash owed for the transaction, you cup it in your palm, concealing the colors of the high bills: the green-orange thousand, the pink-blue five hundred.

This the neighbors will understand, and they would talk, though never to your face: *Look how de white gyal does throw money about!* They would think you wasteful, show-offish.

In the house, rejoicing has already begun. Regina and Todd have prepared the enamel plates. The box does not disappoint, its rich smell cutting right through the mosquito coil air. Pizza, the all-in-one food that requires no utensils, that completes itself in a perfect cycle of sauce, cheese, and bread. You and Todd are enraptured by the convenient, extravagant food of your country, and you dive into its comforting textures and tastes.

But you've forgotten Regina. She puts her fingers in the box gingerly, lifts a slice to her mouth. She has seen the commercials and so she knows how it should be eaten, tip first, raised up as if the entire piece could be descended to the gut in one gooey, delicious mess. Like all Guyanese, she does not waste food, crunching chicken bones between her teeth to suck out the marrow. She is a girl who knows how to eat. But this is a new delicacy, and you watch her face as she struggles to discern the strange spices on her tongue. It's as if you have taken her back home to feast in the kitchens, camps, and dorm rooms of your past. She is feeding on the food of your memories.

The box is empty soon enough, the soda bottles drained of their brilliant sugar water, and you feel satiated and guilty at the same time. The box holds only grease stains now, and little strands of cheese which Regina pries off with her fingernails. When she goes to throw it away it's far bigger than the barrel will allow, and it sits, balanced over the top, sharp angles jutting up to the ceiling. Shirley will wonder when she sees it, unaccustomed to finding trash like this in her house. She has already dug your strange rubbish out of the bin several times and transformed it into entirely new implements: empty metal tubes of toothpaste have become soap dishes, glass bottles

now hold candlesticks, a wire hanger is used to clear the drain.

It's movie time. Even with the bright lights of the house, even in the thick nighttime heat, the scenes of mental breakdown and perilous snowstorms seem terrifying. The VCR clicks loudly and makes buzzing noises, and a message at the bottom of the screen "Bubba's Video Store—Not for resale" flashes at random, but still you find yourself quaking and jumping. The spectral twins appear and you release a small scream. Regina and Todd stare at you.

"Haven't you seen this before?" Todd asks.

Regina says nothing but seems to be communicating that the slasher films would have been much better.

Hours pass and the thrill of the evening begins to wear on you. Nothing has happened and everything has happened. By the time Jack appears with his long knife, Todd has fallen into a stupor of nostalgia, lethargy, and grease from which you wake him on the sofa. As his eyes flutter open, you meet them and see desire for many things, near and far, including you. You have also craved the long length of his body next to yours, but the raw need in his eyes still takes you by surprise. For now, you have no privacy, nowhere to go without Regina coming along. Looking back at the characters fighting their way through the blizzard in the labyrinth, you regain yourselves. Pizza will have to be enough, tonight.

"You need to go back to Enid's," you remind him, and he nods, shaking it off.

Calling goodnight to Regina, he shuffles toward the door. You hug him, and his rumpled shirt releases a familiar detergent smell because it is one of the ones that hasn't yet been washed here.

"I'll see you tomorrow," you say, and he nods silently.

He walks toward the dirt road, glancing back at you once. His expression is lost in the darkness.

The next morning you will wake up with a slight hangover from the chemical smoke. Nikki will be pulling dead frogs out of the shower. The TV will be blasting *The Price Is Right*. Shirley will have used your pizza box to patch a hole in the roof. And Regina will be quiet and sullen again. But as you pass by her on your way to the kitchen, where you'll reach for a glass of passion fruit juice, she will flash you a quick and startling smile.

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