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Anton Nimblett

MARJORY'S MEAL

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No one noticed the Old Man during that last week. The first day, he had just started getting everything ready, not fully decided on what he would do. In the old shed that still stood in the patch of trees at the bottom of the hill, he started sweeping with the homemade *cocoyea* broom that was in the corner. Though everyone now called it the old shed, not so long ago it seemed, it had been their daughter Gloria's dolly house for tea parties; and before that, the big fort for the older boys' war games; only Glen the youngest, had not spent much time there. But in the beginning, it had been the marriage house – the place where the Old Man had proudly brought Marjory his then new wife. And though now it was seldom used, he had been drawn here, maybe for the memories, maybe for some solitude in which to find calm. As he swept the dust and cobwebs away, he could hear her laugh, a mix of shyness, fear, hope and happiness; when they had lived in this wooden shack, he had promised her that the world and their lives together lay just ahead, simply awaiting their grasp. Now, all these years later, it was the right place for him to prepare this thing, this delicate meal.

In the dewy hours of Tuesday, while Gloria was still asleep, he had moved through the kitchen in the Main House deciding what he could take to the shed. Not because he needed to sneak around or act like a thief in his own home, but rather because this preparation was so fragile in his mind, and so personal a labor, that he felt the need to hold it close to him, and so to keep it just for him and his Marjory. He selected some enamel plates and bowls from the set that no one used anymore, tucked away back in the cabinet near the kitchen table; from the cupboard over the kitchen sink, the old grater that looked like a percussion instrument and hadn't been used since the shiny stainless steel

Osterizer had taken its place; some wooden spoons and a beat-up wood-handled knife from the back of one of the drawers; and finally, the stone mortar and pestle from on top of the cupboard. The Old man hadn't climbed up this high in a long time. No one used this old fashioned grinding tool anymore, but it sat atop the cupboard like a simple sculpture on display; it was the one thing that might be missed.

At 11 o'clock he sat on a stool in the back of the shed, facing the woods with an orange and the wood-handled knife in his lap. He could just barely hear the waves lapping on shore, singing a harmony to the melody of the rustling leaves, broken by the rhythm of a loud bird asking over and over "qu'est que il dit, *keskidee*". Mindlessly he worked at the orange, slipping the sharp blade between the rind and the fleshy white pith, not noticing the mini-explosions of fragrant oil sparking on his hands; he focused instead on making an inventory and on planning the rest of the week, planning the meal. Eventually he looked down and saw that he'd created a single, long spiral of orange rind. When the children were still young, he would peel an orange or a grapefruit like this, keeping the rind in one long, curvy snake – a father's simple magic act to entertain them. But they were not here now, and so he just wiped the knife's blade on his old pants and then cut the orange in two along its equator. He sucked the orange with the sweet juices running down his chin, mixing with his salty sweat and saliva, like the jumble of emotions swirling in his heart. He hung the orange rind on a nail head to dry, the first ingredient of the meal.

He hadn't started this, planning to cook a meal. Marjory, had no appetite; and when she did eat, it was hard for her to keep anything down. So by the time he had formed this idea, and the plan was hatching in the fore of his mind, he still was unsure of what this meal would be. But once decided, the only thing that was unquestionable was that there would be blue crab. Some way, it had to have some blue crab in there.

The first frugal meal Marjory had cooked for them, the day after they had gotten married, was blue crab, curried crab. They had been awkward around each other, and the marriage dance that they would eventually master over all their years, was still a

tentative two-step, with neither of them quite sure where the hands went or how to shift on a downbeat. So he had gone out that day, as much to settle his soul, and to ground himself in the natural world of the coast and the mangrove, as to bring back some specific item. Nonetheless, he ended up coming back home with half a dozen blue crabs that he had caught. And later, Marjory cleaned them, seasoned them and curried them down – a dry, smoky curry made over the coal pot.

They ate quietly, in the simple shack that would be theirs until years later when he built the house up the hill; the kerosene lamp sitting on the bare, wooden table between them, cast their silhouettes in two grand, flickering shadows on the walls. The crab was good, and they cracked into the shells and sucked out the sweet meat, licking the brown-yellow sauce off their fingers. And right after that meal of curried crab, they were together for the first time as a man and woman. Yes, they had spent the previous night in the same bed, but unlike an American movie, or an English romance novel, that honeymoon night had been strange and shy and their marriage bond had remained unconsummated.

So, it was on the second night, that they had flowed with the currents that pulled them toward each other. And on that second night, with all the manly strength that he felt, the power that he had used with abandon on a handful of other women before they were married, he had taken his place as her husband over her. And on the same night she had first shown her simple, earthy majesty over him. Yes, lying under him, she held on to the smooth, taut skin at his hipbones as he felt all of his hardness inside her. And it was like this, almost always like this, that she would guide him as they were joined in a love act. She would hold on and he would be moved – grinding, riding – to her unspoken direction; she would touch him there and push back when she was ready, raise up to meet his thrust, then pull him back down slowly and wind in surging, assured, circles; eventually she would grab the back of his neck, drawing his face to her hot bosom, raising their passion to a climax. Anyone watching might have seen only the strong, sweating husband and believed that he was in control, like watching a boat on the water with no awareness of the rudder underneath pushing the tide to make the hull turn this way or that.

By Wednesday he started gathering more ingredients. He would need a good pumpkin – nothing big, but one sweet and full of perfume. He didn't have to worry much about picking the right one because the pumpkin vine in the back of the main house was always bearing and it never had a bad gourd on it. While he was back there, he was drawn to the pumpkin blossoms like a bee seeking pollen. So when he returned to the shed, his haul was not just a ripe, fragrant pumpkin that he'd set out to get, but also some delicate pumpkin flowers that he couldn't seem to leave behind; and he had added to this harvest bouquet, a bunch of limes and a handful of lime buds.

On Thursday he would get the other ingredients. He would put on long, rubber boots, walk half a mile north along the shore, and then into the mangrove to catch crab. He would bring back four hairy, blue crabs, so that he could select the best ones when he cooked. From one of the coconut trees on the way back he would pick a few coconuts – insurance again, that by Friday he had would have the right one to grate, not so green that the flesh inside was still a jelly, but not so old that the coarse copra was spoiled and rancid. “Always make sure yuh keep some options on the table”, he had cautioned his boys about business through the years. But truth be told, that was a lesson he'd learned, as a boy, from watching his own mother manage her house.

Not one of the four children that Marjory had given him saw that he was up to something during that week. They talked to him – “Daddy, come and eat something. Yuh have to eat”; and they talked about him – “George, how you think the Old Man making out with this thing?” But each one of the children was busy with the jobs they had found for themselves or the others had assigned them. Gloria was the chief nurse and ever at their mother's side. Gregory focused on the business, keeping all the daily problems to himself and sparing the others petty worry. George organized doctors' visits, and medicine deliveries and made arrangements with the priests and church elders. Glen, still in school at Presentation, had been ordered to keep his mind on his upcoming exams. The one thing that the Old Man had preached and preached over the years, one thing that they had all learned, was that regardless of the undertaking, you were supposed to

perform well. And maybe they had all learned this lesson because of his painterly tales about working in the coconut groves as a boy, and in the oil field in his youth or building the business as man. Tales he told again and again. Or maybe even because of the “cut tails” they use to get if they shirked their chores when they were growing up; or because with each day, the Old Man showed it by example in the work he did himself. But maybe too, they got it without him knowing, without them knowing, from being in the house with Marjory.

Marjory had been the Old Man’s life. The world might never have known it. The church people in the little Point Cocoa Anglican Church and the wives of business associates who came to the compound for the annual New Year’s Day party might have seen only the lucky country girl whose husband had built a big-time business and put her and her children in a nice house on the hill. But the Old Man always knew it, because it was the wellspring of his strength and the light of his purpose. And while the great poets have had their muses to inspire their works, to fuel their creativity, Marjory had inspired his whole life and been his whole, quiet passion.

Gloria and George, the oldest two, had grown up in the lean years before the money. They had seen their mother spend as much time and invest as much care to prepare lunch when she had only a few green figs and some yams, as when she had chickens to bake and cheese and milk enough to make macaroni pies. Gregory had seen her iron his school uniform every night to make sure the crease lasted all day long. And Glen had seen her crochet the tablecloth that they still used on Easter and Christmas, and the antimacassars for the chair arms, and even the cloth that was used on the altar when the Bishop visited their church.

On Friday, while he could still hear the gravel crunch under the jeep’s tires as the boys left for the day, he got dressed; and he walked down the hill as the first light sparkled off the moist crystals on the grass. As usual, he was glad for the early morning stillness: a quiet that could only be had before the soft lap of the low tide waves was broken by the cock’s crow. This same soft light and gentle sound had allowed him, a little boy, to

dream big dreams; a young man to plot grand schemes; a man to plan his moves before a day's challenges; and now an old man to remember, and to think simple, peaceful thoughts. This last week, there had been no big dreams or wild schemes, only a rising tide of memory as he moved with purpose and strength, powered by the pull of some distant moon.

Again he sat down with an orange and the wood-handled knife. For five days now he had been working on this, working for the first time not on what he wanted, not toward a chosen destination; but simply accepting what seemed like the only choice that life was now allowing. For a lifetime he had created his own paths, slashing through thickets of what often seemed like this island's indigenous barriers – poverty, classism, jealousy, corruption – and still made his own way. And with that same drive, for the past months he had fought against accepting any of this. Fought and slashed, planned and imagined, all up until this last week. But, this week had somehow brought an acceptance of Marjory's condition. After his initial denial, then growing anger, and even powerless frustration, finally, he was swimming with the rip tide instead of fighting against it. And now he sat with the juice of this orange running down his chin; juice suddenly matched by salty tears flowing from some deep well of loss, pushed to the calm surface of what had been his pool of strength. The tears came drop by drop, welling until they flowed, and flowing more and more until they bloomed into sound – one low, deep sob and then another and another, until his body was shaking. And then he had to set the knife down as he crumbled from his middle, folding at the gut and catching his head in his hands. There, with the breeze still gently stirring the leaves, with the birds still singing sweetly and the waves still lapping on the shore, he cried alone.

Down in the shed, the Old Man started his the stone off the wire-mesh covering and

mission by
lighting the
coal pot. The
coals would
burn, heating
to the right
temperature
while he saw
to the other
preparations.
Outside, he
smashed the
coconut open,
then absorbed
himself in
transforming
the rough
white and
brown flesh,
first into a
coarse,
speckled
meal, then a
soft mush, and
finally into a
creamy white
liquid. He cut
the pumpkin,
scraping away

Marjory's Meal

Ingredients

2 blue crabs
2 cups of coconut milk
1 cup of pumpkin, roasted & crushed
2 pumpkin blossoms
1 lime
several lime 'buds'
dried peel of 1 orange
spice sticks (cinnamon)
pinch of salt
2 teaspoons of brown sugar

Coconut milk

Husk and break open dried coconut with cutlass or machete; drain liquid and reserve to drink later; remove coconut meat from shell; grate coconut meat to a fine pulp over bowl; add enough water to make pulp moist but not runny; in a clean, cotton cloth, twisted into a closed bulb, squeeze moist pulp in batches over a bowl until it yields no more milk.

Roasted pumpkin

Place a large wedge of ripe pumpkin, skin side down, in the white coals of a coal pot; roast until flesh of pumpkin is tender to a fork (about ½ hour); remove from coals and let cool to touch; scoop flesh from pumpkin skin and place in mortar; grind with pestle to a coarse puree.

Orange Peel tea

Bring two cups of water to a rapid boil, add about four or five inches of dried orange peel to water and let steep for at least five minutes; remove peel and serve in teacups sweetened with one teaspoon of brown sugar per cup.

Pumpkin blossoms stuffed with crabmeat

Clean crabs thoroughly - remove backs and any sand or mud, rinse under running water and rub liberally with lime.

Place coconut milk in cast iron pot on a rack over the coal pot.

Add lime buds, a spice stick and remaining orange peel and bring to a gentle boil.

Add crabs and simmer until cooked, about 15 minutes.

Remove crabs from pot and let cool to touch.

Crack crab and remove crabmeat from shell.

Combine crabmeat with pumpkin; season lightly with salt, adding just enough of reserved coconut boiling liquid to achieve a creamy texture.

Gently stuff mixture into pumpkin blossoms with a spoon, leaving enough room to twist flower closed.

Place stuffed pumpkin blossoms on coconut shells and roast briefly over coals, about 5 minutes.

Arrange stuffed blossoms on plates and decorate with lime buds and spice sticks.

Serve with orange peel tea.

pulled the two
best crabs still
clawing from the
pail. Cleaning
them, he thought
about Marjory's
curry, but knew
that the lightly
spiced, softly
perfumed,
approach he
planned was right.
Yes, as he
finished the meal,
taking time with
each specific step,
he infused the
process with a
little of all that he
had gotten from
his Marjory over
the years.

When he was
done, he
walked back
up the hill and
climbed the
back stairs

the tangled mesh of seeds, and put a wedge of into the kitchen; he placed the covered
it into the coal pot's "oven". Then he moved tray on the kitchen table, and when he

told Gloria to go into town, the finality of the statement didn't leave room for her to question, or protest that she had to stay and take care of her mother. "Take the car and go to Point and get some stamps and envelopes," he said. But he touched her arm before she walked out the door and said, "don't worry, I can take care of your Mother."

The Old Man stands with the tray at the bedroom doorway watching Marjory propped up on the pillows; tentative suddenly, he remembers the postures of their children bringing their first report card homes; he sees Gloria standing before him, with a Father's day card made in school and Glen with a "mad bull" kite that he wanted help to fly. Marjory turns ever so slightly, a shift of her head to the left, enough for him to see that she is awake, but with enough tightness in her jaw to betray the effort this small move takes.

"Marge," he says softly. "Marjory, I brought you a little something to eat."

Moving more quickly now, he goes over to the bed placing the tray on the side table, and then moves a chair so he can sit beside her. "Come and eat a little bit of this, girl," he says as he moves the dishtowel away to show the tray. The pastel, pumpkin blossoms and spice sticks balance the deep green of the lime buds on the plate. "But aye, aye," she asks softly. "What is all this, pretty, pretty flowers and spice?" "Well you know I ain' no cook, but I tried to make a little thing here," he says, matching her small smile. "Just for the two of us, okay?"

He cuts into one of the flowers, and holds the lightly loaded fork to her lips. Then, taking a forkful for himself, he is comforted that the pumpkin is easy to chew, happy that the whole work is moist, sweet, and delicate. "Here Marge, drink some orange peel tea," he says next. Wordless, accompanied by the sounds of the breeze through the trees, they continue these steps: a small fork for her, a fork for him, a sip of tea. As they make their way past the halfway mark, she looks at him and says, "Crab, eh?" "Boy, you remember to put crab in here too," with a trace of the sparkle that has kept him happy for so many years.

After they have eaten together, they sit quietly in the afternoon light; the Old man seated in the straight-backed mahogany chair, his Marjory nestled on the soft mattress. He doesn't hear the

sea moan down the hill; after a lifetime of its company, it's like the sound of his own breathing. And as he has done on so many nights for their lifetime together, now he absorbs the rhythm of his wife's breathing, even this low, labored cadence – and that too, he does not hear.

In this quiet, for the first time since he has known this woman who has brought him so much, he feels that he has given her a real gift. Almost forty years ago, he had brought her a cheap scent, essence of lavender, that he'd awkwardly chosen to try to win her attention; at the time, he'd thought that the feeling of inadequacy had come because he had wanted to buy something more expensive, something grander. But through the years, as they grew together, as his pockets deepened and his options increased, the feeling returned. Fancy linen handkerchiefs, English tea biscuits, gold bangles and chains, and real French perfume. But still the feeling – over and over again until, he recognized his true belief that she had given him more than he could ever match.

And now, though it is not the case that he feels a balance of the scales, he watches her drift gently into sleep and feels that he has given her something small and meaningful. And it will be this moment, this gift, that he will clutch to his heart when he drifts into his own final sleep that will take him to meet her once more, just months after she had leaves him sitting on a wooden chair, in a gentle breeze, in their house on the hill.