

I HATE THE COLD

By Toby C., Stockbridge, GA

Eight years ago my eight-year-old self sat on a plane that was preparing to take its passengers eight hours away from its current location of a perfect eighty degrees Fahrenheit. Sitting on the only runway of a tiny island, the thought of this departure had warm tears silently but insistently staining my sun-touched cheeks and blurring the aerial view of the colorful land I was leaving. A few other children on the cramped plane, much younger than me, were crying as well. However, looking up at my dad in response to him squeezing my hand, my first ever observance of this strong man silently crying with me assured me that my tears had nothing to do with the childish fears of flying or the bearable discomfort of unfamiliar seats. This was the cause of the vocal upsets of the other crying children but for my dad and I the cause was the thought of leaving.



Image Credit: Marybeth L., Hamilton, NY

Several hours before, I had sat in my grandfather's lap as he said the only words I can recall him directly saying to me: "I'm going to miss you. My baby girl." Being a man of very few words I was taken by this statement and unsure of how to respond. I stared at him for a moment then, deciding not to deal with the thought of having to leave, I smiled at him, kissed him on the cheek, and ran from a simple kitchen to the outside. In a yard surrounded by the silhouette of tall palm trees against a fading orange sky and several family members' houses I finished off the day's energy by playing with my cousins in the humid hotness for as long as I could.

I had become accustomed to this heat over the preceding three and a half weeks. Usually a girl terrified of dirt and any nonhuman thing that moved, this overbearing yet addicting heat drew my curiosity towards exotic bugs on windowsills, giant coconut crabs on shaded sand and even to witness the capture of a snake hiding in spider webbed rafters, and all without a single frightened shriek. The constant sound of dogs barking and mysterious evening breezes was my bedtime lullaby, distracting me from warm air that beckoned me out to play. I would wake to roosters fussing in the yard about the new sun shining. Some days I'd follow the sound of the roosters to my grandparents outside kitchen, the same place I'd sit and feel the chilling relief from that beloved heat brush my skin with the mist of rain. This was my reminder that this island's warmth was not known world wide.

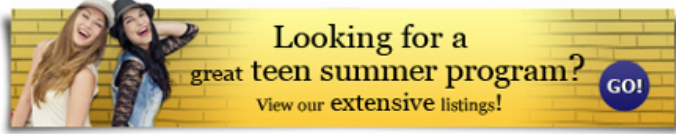
However, in the waters surrounding the island, this reminder could not touch me. While lower in temperature than the breathtaking land, the comfortably warm ocean served as my window to living fire. Vibrant coral displayed a pride of nature's architecture, housing finned fascinations and other graceful water-dwellers. In my young mind this was better than any hard plastic TV electronically rigged to entertain with untouchable images. Despite the water's attempts to wash over my skyward back and the underlying ocean floor, these intriguing coral flames could not be put out.

It was not just this high temperature and tropic wonder I fell in love with. This place was complemented with a culture vastly different from the American one my own house was surrounded by. While the people I knew in America were proper and rigid my family on this island was simplistic and relaxed. The sense of happiness I saw in the faces of numerous aunts, uncles and cousins outweighed the scenery of vibrant vegetation and weather fit for paradise. Despite being a family of ten children, twenty-five grandchildren, and several great-grandchildren, almost everyone gathered for dinner at the same spot every night. The rugged roof of my grandparents' outdoor kitchen, part tin, part tarp, no guarding walls, welcomed relatives, directly related or not, and numerous family friends to come enjoy company with a hot meal. Although this dining area lacked fine wood floors, dazzling chandeliers, or elegant dinner-ware, its dirt trodden cement floor, bare light bulbs hanging from leaky rafters, and paper plates would settle in my mind as the most pleasant and heart-warming place I had ever or ever would eat. Of course, this was greatly due to the people I ate with. Boisterous laughter and constant guitar chords being accompanied by the smooth voices of my family was the soundtrack to those meals that summer. The rhythm of accented English mixed with the native tongue fueled my energy while I strived to stay awake and hear more. Such a festive tone to life was what I came to love. At first it seemed strange to me, gathering with a warm cheerfulness every night, not just on holidays, but I soon saw it as how families should be.

That is not to say that my family in paradise was not worry free. I did not enter one extravagant house; in fact, most were small cement blocks with a few cramped rooms and simple appliances. Their vehicles were worn down and getting in one was like entering an over powerful sauna. The mutterings I heard of the local government were never complimentary and the jobs they had never seemed ideal to me. Yet, the island's people always seemed content. Whether it was the presence of a large family, the high respect for others that was rarely broken, or the fiery passion of Catholicism fused with the culture, these people, the source of my identity, were full of glowing hope and love.

I eventually was called in from the tropic warmth of the night to finish packing and did not miss my chance to tell my grandpa I would miss him too before leaving for the airport the next morning. However, as I sat on the black hot tarmac in an airplane chair that could swallow me, a personalized air condition vent blasted me in the face with frigid air and

reminded me that I was returning to a place where leaves would soon be frozen to their end, where cold-hearted and creepy creatures would still feed my fear, where suburban parties would lack true celebration, where material wants could harden hearts and suppress the warm connections of humanity, where I would feel cold. So I reached up to turn the sinister vent off, gave my dad's hand a squeeze as I understood the hurt of leaving his childhood home, and let the last of those warm tears fall as that perfect island, forever engraved in my heart was whisked away from my view.



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