A Summer Evening

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I was surprised to find the garden awash with light when I got home. It was most unusual and it alarmed me. These garden lights were unkind to my electric bill and were usually switched off unless something was up. The last time I turned them on was New Year's Eve. I had wanted the garden to look festive while I lay half-conscious in bed, watching millennium shows on TV. I drove into the driveway tonight and found something was indeed up: a tent, in the middle of the garden. Before I could make sense of it, Julian, my seven-year-old, flew out of the tent flap and announced, "We're sleeping here tonight!"

My shoulders dropped. Tonight of all nights, I thought. The air was hot and sticky and heavy. Not even a slight breeze blew. The outdoors offered no relief whatever, even at evening, as the full heat of summer was upon us like a thick blanket.

Julian glistened with sweat but the heat was not on his mind. He was thinking 'camping.' He took hold of my hand and led me toward the tent for a look-see.

"You must be the GRO," I said.

"What's a GRO?"

"'Means you're this cool guy who welcomes guests," I said, squeezing his sticky hand.

Inside, we found the architect and chief builder, my nine-year old Miguel. He was laying out our winter-proof sleeping bags on the floor, the final act of what must have been, for him, hard

labor. Sweat blobs the size of Buddha beads dotted his face, adding character to his grin. "Try it, Mom," he said, and I lay down on the heavy flannel.

I thought of their father. He had been the proud foreman and cheerleader when this tent was pitched last. 1997. We had been on high ground, in the cold mountains of Wyoming. These sleeping bags had kept us snug and warm against the dark and the unknown. But he would have shot this idea right down, had he been here still. He was a man of little humor about the heat. He had no tolerance for even room temperature. He had installed a two-ton air conditioner in the masters' bedroom, which he kept at full blast all night. "It's like Siberia in here," I had often complained. Come to think of it, many of our bedroom arguments had been about the cold. But the memory of arguments—or even conversations—seemed like a distant life now. I had not seen his face in two years, except in sudden flashes, through Miguel's eyes, through Julian's smile. Like tonight, in the tent.

"Isn't this a great idea, Mom?" Miguel asked. Miguel was the beloved of his father, and he returned it in full measure. When he was three, he said he didn't want to grow up because that would mean Papa would get old and then die. It was his childhood monster, the thought of losing his Dad.

"Fabulous!" I cheered. I had forgotten the heat, too. I liked it when the children got creative and I made it a point to go along with their projects. Two days ago, Ina brought up the idea of fish. Ina is my second child, almost 16; lives on the couch at the foot of my bed and sees UFOs. She said, "Mom, why don't we buy fishes?" In no time, the boys were at it, too: "Yeah, Mom, let's get fishes."

"Fish, not fishes," Kisa said, setting them straight. Kisa, my eldest, was going to college in June and had gotten the hang of mass nouns. Upon hearing that she had passed at the Ateneo, I started to lecture her on how passing the entrance exams and staying on as a student were two different things altogether. But she said, "Let's just