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Haole

by

Shawn Alff

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Haole

Shawn Alff

ABSTRACT

Just after midnight on a chilly April night in 2005, the author finds himself homeless in Hawaii, searching for a place to sleep. The account that follows is the true story of a young man's misadventures on the road as he attempts to reconcile his wanderlust with a need for order and security. This work of creative nonfiction reconstructs the first half of the summer the narrator spent wandering Hawaii. Specifically, this section concentrates on the author's experiences on the island of Oahu. There, the narrator, who constantly changes his name, is stuck at a crossroads; he is torn between his desires for the woman and the life he left in Texas and his need for exploration. At first he drifts along the road eating beef jerky sandwiches, ducking beer bottles flung at him by locals, and camping illegally in public parks. Eventually he finds work and belonging at a new age surf shop on the North Shore, but this stagnant environment only reinforces his desire to wander. After nearly drowning in a surfing accident and being threatened by the owner of the board he destroys, the narrator returns to the road where he has encounters with a military man, Mormons, fellow transients, the police, and a chicken fighter who tries to seduce him. Eventually he leaves Oahu for the island of Kauai. There he finds hope and friendship among the bohemians living communally on organic farms. However, his resolve to live a freewheeling lifestyle is

ultimately tested one night by a band of drug runners who confront him on a deserted beach. This master's thesis celebrates the tradition of the great American road story. While the narrator retraces the footsteps of many who have set out on the open road, his personal account and voice reflect the modern values and cultural forces that lead many of his generation to wander America in search of something more.

Introduction

The call of the wild has been replaced by the call of the open road. Young Americans now look to the road the same way previous generations turned toward the wilderness for the answers and desires they could not satiate in civilized life. As long as young adults have answered this call to wander into the unknown, accounts of their journeys have been celebrated. In fact, a physical journey is the model of a standard story structure. It contains a definite beginning and end. The protagonist has a clear motive to keep moving. And change occurs if only in the physical setting. A story is a journey, as both are much more about the experience rather than the destination.

As a nation of immigrants, America is a fertile setting for journey narratives. We are the descendants of people in search of something more. We are a country of seekers with eyes tilted toward the gold mirage on the Western meridian. Stories of adventures along the road are an expression of the American dream, embodying the pursuit of happiness. These stories celebrate the unending journey of self discovery. Very few settings are more conducive to the unfolding of this dream than the boundless American landscape, which is crisscrossed by roads and highways that serve as this nation's circulatory system, pumping with new life.

By definition, an American road story is a cliché. Narrators travel down worn paths. The setting does not change as much as the traveler's account of it evolves. The pulse of a generation can be measured by the unique visions narrators sees along the road.

These stories are not culture-shock narratives which force characters to cope with foreign experiences. Instead, these tales are journeys into one's own culture and identity.

My master's thesis, "Haole," is a travel memoir that celebrates the tradition of American road stories in the brutal paradise of Hawaii. While countless examples exist of these stories, the most iconic and influential for my work include Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. Briefly examining these works and a few contemporary examples will help explain my stylistic decisions and will help highlight areas that need work in order to make this thesis marketable.

When setting out for Hawaii, I began my journey with the assumption that each choice limits the possible outcomes. As you grow up, the infinite possibilities present to children are quickly reduced by life events and decisions. After graduating college, I was still afraid to make any substantial choices in regards to my future; I was afraid a single misstep could potentially trap me in an unfulfilling existence. However, a common theme in many road stories is the idea that every choice accelerates your journey. Each fork in the road brings you to more crossroads, more options. An infinite number of routes can lead to the same destination. This optimistic spirit of infinite possibilities, the idea that something better lies just beyond the next rise, is best exemplified in American literature by Walt Whitman's free verse poetry, particularly "Song of the Open Road." Whitman diverges from the restricting rules of poetry, opening up the genre to boundless potential. In "Song of the Open Road," Whitman provides a litany of images, people, and places. The only common thread between these is that they exist on the American road. He

embraces the idea that all things are part of the whole and all are good. Whitman was not the first to promote this idea, but he does best represent the spark and hope that drives young men down the road in search of something more.

Mark Twain's, *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, further progresses this theme. This road story unfolds on the most American of rivers, the Mississippi, which serves as the main thruway through the heart of the nation. This well traveled commerce route slices through a wide cross-section of the country, exposing Finn and Jim to various aspects of the American experience as they float down river in search of freedom and adventure. Like most road stories, this novel's narrative engine is not plot. The success of the story has nothing to do with the climax. In fact, the ending delves into the childish absurdity Twain employed in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Instead, Huckleberry's enthusiastic and humorous voice keeps reader's engaged and captivated with his naively wise interpretations of this country.

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is an adult version of *Huckleberry Finn* and the most iconic of American road adventures. Published as fiction, this work documents Kerouac's experiences hitchhiking, walking, and driving across country with the entertaining and hopelessly enthusiastic antihero, Neal Cassidy. This book embodies all elements of a road story. *On the Road* has very little discernable plot. It is never certain what exactly motivates the narrator to go on these trips or what is at stake. Kerouac simply roves around the country searching for "kicks" and "digging" the wild scenes. As evidence of this book's lack of a plot, many Hollywood production companies have failed to adapt this work to the screen. It does not follow a conventional story arc with rising action and

a decisive climax. The destinations are always trivial, constantly shifting between Denver, San Francisco, and New York. The only constant in the book is the characters' restless need to hit the road and head across the country in search of something more. The narrative engine is entirely fueled by the chemically amplified voice of an optimistic young writer hungry for experiences.

Kerouac does not explore new physical terrain. He sticks to the road. However, he finds new life between the cracks of American cities. Similarly, while there are innumerable travel guides about Hawaii, "Haole" strives to uncover that which is overlooked in these vacation handbooks.

"Haole" also is intended to be a travel memoir that readers can use to learn about Hawaii or backpacking. In travel writing and historical fiction, one of the narrator's responsibilities is to serve as an entertaining tour guide. While the writer's personal experience is important, it is not always the main focus. James A. Michener's historical fiction, *Hawaii*, exemplifies the type of research driven information many readers crave. Like Michener's other works such as *Alaska*, *Texas*, and *Space*, *Hawaii* features subplots, but the main concern is relating information about the region in an entertaining manner. Readers want to be entertained and educated. If "Haole" is to be successfully marketed as a travel memoir, it needs to be grounded in much more historical, cultural, and natural background information about Hawaii and backpacking. In fact, because this book lacks a wealth of dramatic events and covers a limited region and time, research will do much to amplify the narrative.

I first attempted “Haole” as a meta-fiction piece in which my character searches for an adventure he can then use to write a profitable screenplay. My decision to abandon this convention was reinforced in a workshop when a graduate student who teaches creative writing for film majors said this is the most common cliché among film students. While I largely abandoned this as a structure, the theme of wanting to lead a life worth telling about runs throughout the narrative. My character’s delusions of future events are almost entirely fantasies conceived in terms of cliché movie scenes. Also, several sections offer a commentary on how my character’s identity, behaviors, and desires are reflections of pop culture.

While removing this element sped up the narrative, it also left a hole in explaining the narrator’s motives for embarking on this journey. In reality, no single reason led me to the road. However, modern readers expect an author to articulate a universe of ideas into a condensed message that can easily be digested and understood. A specific motive is essential for convincing the audience to understand and sympathize with my character’s struggle. This will also help relate what is at stake as well as dictate what elements to cut or emphasize.

Nonfiction is afforded some grace in compensating for a lack of dramatic action with reflection and background details, but memoirs still must rely on a central plot and story arc. Plot is one of the most difficult things to incorporate into a work of nonfiction. Life does not unfold according to conventional storylines. However, nonfiction writers are put to the task of finding a suitable narrative structure. The ultimate flaw of many travel memoirs is that writers invest in a story before they know if their journey will

contain enough dramatic action to constitute a book. Despite premeditation, travel pieces necessarily create rising action as the travelers and readers get more invested in the trip and its completion. Also, an arduous journey cannot help but change the traveler. A travel writer must find the symbolic event that best demonstrates this change. While “Haole” may utilize an intellectual or emotional climax, I am still searching for the event that best demonstrates this change and a way to articulate this transformation. As with describing my motivation behind the journey, there is no single answer. Once I decide on this element, it will influence what is highlighted and cut throughout the narrative.

The journey of writing a road story is just as significant as the journey itself. Examining the significance of my actions and what motivated me will change me as much as the actual experience. This is the joy of writing; it is an expedition of self-discovery. At the end of a long work, the writer emerges from the wilderness of words a different person.

Chapter One

Me, sweat streaked, sleep starved, raw, running toward a neon dawn blooming over the black hill country. Knotted oaks and spiked cedars push me off the gravel shoulder, to charge head-on down the unlit two-lane into oncoming headlights. Tires sizzle and high beams widen, whitening out the terrain. I brace against the consuming flash then run on into the unadjusted dark. The limestone drainage ditch yields underfoot as I hurdle prickly pears and imagined rattlesnakes. The remains of overfed and under hunted deer lie scattered along the ditch, feeding the first blooms of bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes. Commuters speed from gated communities ornamented with windmills and bed sheet sized Texas flags. The drivers' eyes are too tired to register my blurred passing as anything but a spook seeking shelter from the day. In the cool of spring, the heat that chars this country from May through November is forgotten. My troubles, eased by exhaustion, give way to flights of fantasy, grandiose visions of a horseless cowboy, a boy, me, drifting down that rural road. Here is the sum of my all-American childhood. Here, my boyhood dreams were forged against the ironwood terrain, and here they will remain as a phantom roving the rolling plains—an unborn outlaw abandoned to the modern west.

* * *

She, Anezka, a name, an anesthetic numbing the lips with repetition. I untangle her naked limbs from a comforter where she sleeps unconscious of my absence. Her

pupils bounce beneath her eyes lids, dreaming my death aside the road, if not from a careening car then from an overanxious and caffeinated heart.

It was she who convinced me I would go dumb with exposure if I set out across Texas on foot. And, it was she who persuaded me to travel someplace tropical with a constant beach to keep me cool and clean—the kind of setting that illustrates her mother’s romance novels.

She grips my sweaty wrist while I kick the contents of her overnight bag into a mound then slide away. Our last moments together can’t involve me drenching her in sweat and morning breath. I slip into the shower then scrub my weak enamel and receding gums. Excessive sweat and poor oral hygiene are clear signs of transience, and both are family traits.

I thrust into her at a speed that mimics my running pace and close my eyes to contain the sensation. An image repeats of Anezka sputtering out from beneath me like a deflating balloon. I can’t stop thinking about how this, whatever it is, will end in moments with a muted climax and a fading conscious of what it feels like to be with her. I’m obsessed with predicting endings. Unfortunately for her, this compulsion ruins every romantic comedy we ever watch, and every romantic moment I attempt to orchestrate.

Still naked, she sits in unmade sheets, watching me towel off again before I pull on pants that unzip at the knees, a tight nylon t-shirt, and running shoes. She refuses to collect her things as I recheck the contents of my hiking backpack. My father couldn’t understand why my brother bought this pack for my college graduation when I knew I’d receive rolling luggage from him—the same set my brother received for corporate trips.

* * *

Us, dissolving in the swirl of ticket travelers dropped off and picked up, filtered in and out of the automatic doors by whistle blasts and preset warnings about idling in the loading zone. Anezka's curbside expression is cemented behind reflective aviator shades that warp my face. I nod to a desert soldier in pixilated fatigues, no older than me, hunched beneath a pack, gripping his sobbing child of a wife.

"I won't be gone as long as him," I say.

"I won't wait as long as her," she says.

Anezka has always had a gift for sentimentality.

Chapter Two

The convulsions of the 737 conferring with the runway shake me awake. Midnight vacuum cleaners absorb the tiki-torch music serenading the abandoned terminals. I follow the communion of budget travelers, the mission group uniformed in loose athletic gear and the family clearing crusted sleep from their eyes, arguing over who's missing. A Polynesian woman in a formless dress cut from a hibiscus print offers plastic leis to new arrivals.

“What hotel?” she asks, her face drawn tight as I stand at the head of the receiving line with my head bowed.

“Doesn't everyone get one?”

She elbows me aside, greeting the next man with a singsong, “Alooo-ha.”

* * *

Most winos can't figure out how to unzip their pants before pissing, and yet they still manage to sleep successfully under freeways or in all-night laundry mats. The only thing required is surrender, or an empty plastic bottle of Rebel Yell. No sooner do I lie beneath merging overpasses than my skin crawls with ants. I dance around like a back alley schizophrenic, slapping at my synthetic clothes and failing to restrain my frenzied yelps. None of the travel websites I searched advertised that along with sunbathing, swimming, and hiking, Hawaii's perfect year-round climate is ideal for insects.

I settle for a clean sheet of concrete shielded from a main road by hedges dotted. Across the adjoined parking lot, a side street offers motorists a perfect view of me looking like a lumpy pile of refuse. I realize then how useless my rain resistant mummy sack is for sleeping in public. It serves only as a vinyl body-bag.

A chill works through my dual rain coats. I force my head steady against my pack and concentrate on a halo of insects searching for god in the street lamp. Across the parking lot, the business's sign flickers on. I'm sleeping beside a morgue.

* * *

Transient lights herd shadows across my eyelids. The screech of breaks scales the dormant distance. I wait for a crash that never comes. The city stirs. Fear forces my eyes open in sleep. My body convulses in attempt to wake. Anezka found me in this state once while I dozed on her floor, eyes wide and body quaking. She thought I was having a seizure, and maybe I was. Some epileptics claim they experience god during grand mal fits. In my convulsions, dark figures loom over my paralyzed form.

Headlights draw near.

Siren screams climb the concrete landscape.

I snap upright.

Not ten minutes have passed.

This cycle repeats every quarter hour, ending with a frill-necked lizard inches from my neck, hissing. I wake, unsure if the reptile was imagined or an extra abandoned after the filming of *Jurassic Park* on Oahu.

A trash man stares at me as he unchains the gate that secures the morgue's dumpster. I cinch my pack to leave.

"Who you, brah?" the driver yells when he climbs back in his rig.

I consider the possibilities. I should say something dramatic, something like, "Who do you say I am?" or at least something threatening and mysterious, like "They call me Snake," but this is not what I say.

"Nobody," I mutter.

"Fucking haole."

* * *

Four hours in Oahu and I'm lost less than a mile from the airport. The lights of a closed fast food restaurant draw me near. Early Sunday mornings before mass, I used to follow my father to closed fast food joints. My tiny hands fit between the grates beneath drive-through windows, exhuming loose change. An evaporated milk-shake and what looks like hardened frosting covers the cement picnic table. Insects gather around the dried excess.

A tune fills my mouth like saliva.

With no one to witness my lapse of sanity, my voice grows. I sing like my mother sang each year after my tenth birthday, when I decided, partly because I didn't have the patience for friends, that I was a man, and men didn't have birthday parties. My voice jumps in pitch like hers did each time her wooden spoon popped my wrist, silencing my sobbing with song. Like the woman I left behind, my mother refused to let me pity the situations I chose for myself.

I sing, "Happy birthday to me. Happy birthday to me..."

Today, I am twenty three.

Chapter Three

Slumber-faced hotel employees unload from buses and trudge silently down streets named with stuttering vowels like parodies of Hawaiian words: *Nohonani*, *Lilioukalani*, *Paoakalani*. Clean floral shirts and pressed white pants give them the look of ticket takers at a Hawaiian theme park. High-rise condos and hotels prolong dawn in their skyward competition for views of Waikiki beach. Vacationing joggers and morning surfers lugging long boards trickle toward the surf. Business men wearing tucked-in polo shirts and crisp straw hats displaying golf course insignias flip through newspapers outside franchise coffee shops. Older couples crowd benches before the beach is spoiled by the beautifully young. Japanese tourists march with precision, arms behind their backs, and expensive cameras dangling from their necks as they bend to read municipal plaques. Bums congregate in a gazebo designated for weddings, dressed like waterlogged tourists: bent visors advertising Oahu, tattered yet trendy surf shirts, flip flops duct taped together, and all missing at least one essential piece of clothing. Waves unfurl in long, rolling lengths that lap at Waikiki's shrinking shoreline. Fresh and wilted brown leis hang from the necks of Hawaiian royalty, Christian saints, surf icons, and Mohit Ghandi immortalized in bronze statues. Soon, with the modern advances of climate change, these seaside prophets will wade into the ocean to watch the towers of Honolulu bow to the next great flood already lapping at the seawall.

For graduation, my parents gave me a pocket-sized Bible, thinking that as long as I'm here searching for myself, I might as well find Jesus. I read Genesis as the sun climbs

the Koolau Mountains behind, vivifying the text: “Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth” (Genesis 4:14).

* * *

My first memory of the ocean is as a toddler running naked on the beach hand-in-hand with a nameless blonde girl, giggling, pointing as the waves washed over our feet, then receded, pulled the sand out from under our toes, beckoning us to follow, and we did only for the next wave to break over us, tumble us in the sand, send us squealing back to the warmth of our mother’s outstretched towels, only to dry off and do it all again.

* * *

My continental breakfast consists of beef jerky wrapped in generic wheat bread. My hunger, and the rising heat, saps my energy. I stalk tourists down Kalakaua Avenue and slip behind a family into a locked hotel gate. Specimens of Hawaiian vegetation flourish beyond the chains that line the pathway. Grandiose rugs and columns divide breezeways leading through strings of unoccupied living room sets, which look like modern art interpretations of still life paintings. Newspapers cover the circular pink, padded seats in the hotel lobby, absorbing the frustrations of guests waiting to check in and out. On a postcard featuring the Royal Hawaiian, a coral colored castle, I indulge in melodrama and write:

I smell you in each whiff of coconut suntan oil and see you in the glaze of salt water pooling in backs arched over candy colored beach towels. I catch your gaze behind the movie star shades and celebrity magazines that conceal the flaws of

faces that aren't yours. I see you in every downpour of blonde hair walking side-by-side with steroid hulks sporting sleeves of splotchy tattoos, backwards caps, scruffy facial hair, and shaved chests. With each imperfect comparison, my memory of you is effaced, and yet I can't stop searching strangers' faces for some facsimile of your soft cheeks and reptile eyes.

"Can I help you?" asks the maitre d'.

"Yes," I say, snapping the postcard against my fingers. "I seem to have forgotten my toothpaste."

"Certainly sir."

Walking like he has a pineapple shoved up his ass, the maitre d' prances behind his desk and riffles through the drawers. Perhaps I can make it as a con artist after all, maybe slip head first beside the pool and demand a free room. Then again, an island probably isn't the best place to start committing felonies. He dangles the travel-sized tube over me as though it's a bottle of used fungal cream.

"Anything else? Anything at all."

"Thank you, no."

I return to my postcard. He hovers over me, clearing his throat. I fold the paper under my arm and hoist my pack.

"Have a nice day," he says. "Please don't come back."

* * *

Banyan trees sprout like storybook fortresses from the groomed grass of Kapiolani Park. Children cling to the gothic limbs, defending their living castles,

launching sticks like spears and swinging from vines stretching to set new roots. In an elevated gazebo, geriatrics in plastic grass skirts test new hips and walkers, writhing to slow Hawaiian dances. A barefoot girl named Joy stands memorialized in bronze atop a black boulder. A fresh flower sits in her outstretched hand and a purple and white lei hangs over her smooth chest. I polish her foot, removing the grime.

For me, Joy is a Hawaiian reincarnation of *Alice in Wonderland*—a fearless child wandering alone through this island. The cartoon version of Alice was the first girl I dreamed of as a boy. She lured me to a kind of Never-Wonderland island where I flew after her from tree to tree until I caught her, and she dissolved in my arms. With a mind to chase her back to waking life, I leapt from my tree, but in losing her, I doubted myself, and so too lost my ability to fly. I fell, slamming the earth. Flightless and consumed in a canopy of shadows, I was prey to an overwhelming dark force, like a dragon. From previous dreams I knew I couldn't outrun this threat, so I crouched with head buried between my knees, waiting, wanting to be eaten, to wake—but instead I was stuck cowering for hours in fear of my dreams. After that first dream, I lay in bed all day with my Winnie the Pooh sheets precisely tucked around my naked form. My mother asked if I was sick. I nodded, knowing, though not why, that I was too old to be naked. This image of Alice with a tiny nose, wide eyes, and a seamless veil of vibrant blonde hair—all qualities of youth and beauty when paired with womanly curves—haunted my youth, and haunts me now. They all are attributes of Anezka.

Long after our satellites fall like meteors, the copper veins of the computer age corrode, and our books turn to dust, these bronze statues will stand, buried in the topsoil

of our downfall as our final testament to whatever creatures find our images imprinted on the aluminum plaques aboard the Pioneer spacecrafts. And when Joy is unearthed, what will be thought of those who let such beauty slip away?

* * *

The sun sets behind clouds to the disappointment of couples posed for pictures—perfect photos that would serve as evidence that at some point, they were happy. I fill an abandoned paper cup with milk and honey at a coffee shop then sit, dunking bread slices.

* * *

Under the cover of night I infiltrate a high-rise condo complex behind a woman, who is obviously intimidated by my threatening demeanor. She holds the automatic locking gate for all five foot nine of my sinewy stature and smiles as my hairless European-American cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“The water’s fine,” announces a middle-aged man in the hot tub who keeps pushing back locks of greasy blonde hair.

His name is Gary B and mine is Chris. I slip in across from him. He explains how I need to find myself a successful woman so I can spend all day surfing.

“Okay,” I say.

“I always sympathize with my single surfer buds,” he says. “When the weather’s rotten I let them sleep on my couch, or did, until the lady made me quit.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. The weather can wear you out real quick out here,” he says, snorting snot into the tub. “Where’d you say you’re staying again Chris?”

“With a buddy,” I say. “In this complex.”

“Oh yeah? What’s his name.”

“Roberts.”

“Roberts?”

“Robertson.”

“Oh.” He nods. “Well I’d have offered you a place if you needed it.”

The rain comes. In saggy swim trunks that highlight his belly and twig legs, he collects his keys and shuffles into his loafers.

“Does it rain here often?”

Gary B’s cigarette cackle fades into the rush of rain and the gate clacking shut.

Orange leaves circulate like gold fish. I float face down on a lungful of air, arms wrapped around my knees, with the warm light incubating memories of summers spent floating in such pools of water, wondering how long my breath would hold.

* * *

Night winds pour down the mountains, drying my synthetic pants stained by my swim suit beneath. I lay atop a stone picnic table in Kapiolani Park. The wind overpowers my double raincoats. I brought two flimsy jackets in place of a bulky sleeping bag and a professional hiker’s jacket. The raincoats were on clearance and the outer one is a blue version of James Dean’s in *Rebel Without a Cause*. So there I lie, looking fashionably minimal, stocking cap, pants, shoes, glasses with a five-year-old prescription, and hands pinched under my arm pits, shaking involuntarily on a cement slab, like a voluntary human sacrifice long ago forgotten.

The sprinklers shock me with reclaimed water. I tear across the park then curl under a curved palm, with my head pillowed on the raised, dirt base. Clouds sail through the midnight blue. The tennis court lights serve as a night lamp. I count the pop of tennis balls. The screech of tires and passing lights wakes me at fifteen minute intervals. The rain never falls and insects leave me alone for the trash barrels. Dreams are colored by vigilant senses. Childhood nightmares return. I fear some simple, dark force hovering over me. I coil into myself and wake to the fleeting thought that the arms clutching me are Anezka's.

* * *

Buses blaze by on Kalaniana'ole Highway, not bothering to stop at my bench. I study the miles of drainage ditch behind, and the miles to come as I lick my fingers, sucking the residue of a Washington apple that cost as much as a pineapple back home. Bus stops don't offer the air-conditioning, selection of reading resources, toilets, and water fountains of public libraries, but no one stares at you for dozing on your pack at a bus stop. I now appreciate why street-walkers and hustlers gravitate to these public terminals that stink of sedentary life. Here, all are welcome.

Scattered thoughts become circling scavengers, picking scraps from my past and present. Eventually, all questions funnel to one—why—and ultimately, all questions deliver a common answer. Free from the distractions of my mainland life, this interrogation is much more direct. Every journey requires an end point, no matter how illusionary, whether it be Cortez's El Dorado or Columbus's India. All I have is Anezka.

She is the black hole in my consciousness.

“Why?” she asks over the disjointed pay-phone connection. “Why the fuck is sitting on a bus bench a reason to leave me?”

Her anger at my departure has tipped into a kind of depraved humor. In the crackle of static silence, the mind, searching for patterns in the chaos, hears a football team worth of suitors running offensive plays in her bedroom. She is my only legitimate reason for being here, to make her fall back in love with me, but that, as she points out, is horseshit. In the two years we’ve dated, she has become the voice in my head opposite my childhood ideals, telling me to quit being a pussy. She is my emotional editor, forcing me to be happy, and refusing to let me feel sorry for my decisions. Through her ridicule, I’ve slowly learned that being depressed and reserved isn’t sexy, except to teenage girls with a fetish for vampires, but even then the vampires must be famous, and super strong, and given to monogamy. For her, satisfaction is something you consciously choose and construct, and which often involves BBQ, beer, and football.

This is a good enough reason. I’m here to learn how to be happy, with or without her.

* * *

Lines of mansions populate the northeastern side of Diamond Head with lawns like putting greens, gilded gates, and undisturbed pools. I stare at these luxuries like a junky, searching for flaws, like a peeping tom hoping to catch a glimpse of a topless trophy wife. The only people enduring the heat are contractors and landscapers staring back at me.

* * *

My feet dig into the cool sand of Waialae Beach Park as I gnaw on beef jerky sandwiches. I take strength in imagining my body becoming like jerky, tawny and hard. A truncated school bus delivers a troupe of mentally challenged adults. They scatter, bouncing happily over the sand, glancing back at their handlers when their names are yelled for acting up. One woman with a lopsided head leads a prune of a man by the hand to poke various clumps of sand-rolled detritus. They are children searching for seashells and treasure. Eventually her stick finds me. Her male companion offers a slobber stained hand to shake and she asks, “Why you here?”

“Same reason as you I guess.”

She laughs hysterically as does the small man who crams two fingers between crooked teeth. The larger female with boyishly short hair drops her stick and drags me along with her other hand, to join her merry troop.

“Marie,” an orderly yells. “Stop fooling and leave that boy alone.”

* * *

I stash my pack beneath a pool chair and an abandoned towel that reads Kahala Resort. The pack is more than just a physical weight. It slouches over my confidence, making it nearly impossible to look women in the eye. My depraved imagination compares it to the St. Christopher medallion around my neck that features an old man crossing a river with baby Jesus on his back. But, baby Jesus had superpowers and the charms of infancy. The only magic my pack contains is a magnifying glass and a compass from a childhood toy, both of which I brought out of obligation to my sense of adventure.

Despite my best seductive glances, which make me look like a sociable pervert, no wives of golf enthusiasts with fresh pedicures join me in the hot tub. Parents jerk their children away as they pass. I'm a used diaper floating in the water. The only attention I attract is from an idle server who sits on the pool chair next to me, spinning his cocktail tray on a finger. He's a young white guy with spiked hair and a smirk that says he has had some success with the golfers' wives.

"You need anything?"

"I'm good."

"Sure?"

He explains how he arrived in Oahu a few months ago himself. He suggests sights I should definitely check out on a day like today while the weather is good. He draws me a map on a napkin. His manager stands cross-armed behind the bar, watching. I leave, taking account of the vases in the lobby that I will smash when I'm forcibly removed from this resort in the postcard version of this encounter.

* * *

I want to laugh but nothing comes out. I trained for this roadside running along the rural Texas routes, trying to maintain a body fit for reality show stardom. With a last, heroic glance over my shoulder, I bolt down the narrow road. My calves glance the guardrail defining the cliff's edge. Ten yards into my sprint an engine echoes against the rock face, calling me back to my mark. I put my ear to the road like the hunted in an old western, then rise with a half-face of sweat-stuck asphalt and a shit-eating grin. In a flash of bravery or surrender, I jump back over the guardrail and hoof it down the road. My

pack pounds my spine, picking up speed, mimicking the pulse rising in my ear. The wind blasts cinch my clothes and drag me back. Breaks squeal behind, slowing to make the curve. I laugh hysterically. My shadow is cast yards ahead of me, sharpens, and contracts beneath me with exponential speed as my silhouette rushes to take cover beneath each step. The bleat of a horn sends a shock through me. I leap, hook a foot atop the rail and jump into the unknown beyond the road.

* * *

The only lights are pin pricks of headlights defining the road. The scalloped rock shelves offer concave crevices formed from wind and waves powering across the Pacific in search of something to give them voice. I take shelter under an overhang where a boulder has fallen from the rock awning. I scour the rocky landscape disappearing in night. Little grows here. The wind sweeps away the dead, leaving pliable vines and lily pads. I rip out armfuls of green and run back to my cave, stumbling on loose rock sheets that flake like croissants.

I erect a tiny pyramid of vines and attempt to ignite it with crumpled postcards and half a can of bug juice. I huff and puff and feed more glossy prints, but even with my modern advantages, the fire doesn't take. My eyes water, which in turn makes me laugh. Hungry, my emotions are as transitory and volatile as what waits for me up the road. I can't explain why I need, or even want a fire. I have nothing to cook, and yet my bones crave heat and my eyes need something in which to become unfocused.

My exhausted muscles melt over the rock, which reverberates with waves, shaking like a coming volcano—an old-world lullaby rocking me to sleep. This is the

perfect setting for a volcanic love scene with naked bodies blending into the sun bleached rocks and moans drowned in the thundering waves. I giggle then nearly cry. I'm not going mad. Madness was trading a warm bed and a warm body for this stony sleep. For the first time in my life I'm glimpsing sanity. I press my hands in the soft, warm skin between my thighs and curl around them.

Chapter Four

I count the days in lengths of floss, the minutes in sets of push-ups, and the seconds in steps along the concrete balance beam dividing the swish of traffic from a high dive into violent water shredding the cliffs.

* * *

In the lawn of a beach park, white cattle egrets pluck grubs like migrant workers. Beyond the beach, the world lays submerged beneath the remnants of the last great flood carrying the last echoes of the sinking world. The waves pool at this mountain top where I sit, wondering what will resurface from all that was lost beneath the water.

At the park facilities I attempt conversation with the cleaning crew.

“These are really nice bathrooms y’all have here.”

The woman removes the top of a trash bin, jams down the refuse with a gloved hand, and ties the bag closed.

“Nicer than any of the rest stops on the mainland.”

She tips the bin over, slides out the garbage bag, and drags it to her cart.

“I was once stranded at a rest stop in New Mexico for days. Nothing like here. I wouldn’t mind being stranded here. I could live here.”

She climbs in her maintenance truck. Her coworker drives off just as a tour bus pulls into the lot. Shadows press against the tinted windows. A camera flashes, setting off a rash of bulbs echoing soundlessly from the bus windows like a drive-by shooting. I

flinch and make a move to cover up. What am I missing? What is so special about this beach park? Am I a spectacle on the tour route? Am I beautiful, an anomaly, or an example of local wildlife? Am I invisible, or am I an abandoned piece of human waste slowly being convalesced by the jungle? Am I a blur, soon to be cropped from the bottom of vacation photos?

* * *

My hat is missing. I retrace my steps along the cliff's edge, walking more than an hour, smiling at coming cars, holding hands out like a child balanced on railroad tracks. My hat is nowhere. I turn around.

* * *

A winding dirt trail delivers me to a metal observation deck perched on volcanic rubble. On the walk, bicyclists in sponsored spandex suits pass me, squirming in their seats like extras in a commercial for sporty tampons or hemorrhoids medicine. Behind me, the jungle stretches out on either side, requiring a machete to penetrate more than a few feet. A red light house erupts like a painting, the perfect setting for a midnight romance scene, the phallic tower shaking and rumbling with each burst of foaming waves, and flashes of skin caught by the twirling light. The same properties that make it perfect for a romance scene make it ideal for murder, and for hiding a dead body that would be cleaned and stripped by the waves sharpening the island's jagged bite. The longer I stay on the road, the more my visions of love and violence blend. Is this the incarnation of jealousy, or merely a growing hunger for satisfaction?

My bread has begun to ferment, integrating its vinegary scent with my own. I peel the lid on a can of peaches I picked up aside a trash barrel. The can was likely abandoned by a bum who was offered a tourist's lunch. The metal is rusted but the label is only lightly sun-faded and water warped. Of all the fruit on the roadside, fallen from volunteer trees sprouting in ditches, I eat canned peaches. A Brazilian cardinal with a red cap perches on the rail. I offer the bird a sliver. It hops toward the syrupy goop, then flies away uninterested. Alone and desperate, any beautiful trifle is an omen. Superstition combats the unknown.

* * *

"No pedestrians past this point," reads a sign planted at the edge of a scenic overlook.

A new Cadillac idles, emitting a Christian marching hymn. A veteran with white hair blown back and a tucked in Hawaiian shirt stands with hands behind his back, rocking on his feet. He looks as though he's standing before a firing squad or waiting for his car to roll into him.

"Excuse me," I say. He doesn't move. "Excuse me but I'm on foot and pedestrians aren't allowed down this stretch and I was wondering if it would be possible if you could give me a lift just down to that beach park down there."

I had promised myself I would never beg, that I would starve before I asked anyone for change. For me beggars are just lazy tramps who want others to fund their addictions. Even though Texas is flooded with first generation immigrants who arrive without a cent to their name and no social security card, these souls find a way to survive

without begging. It's the all-American burnouts who fill the street corners holding handmade signs instead of earning change hoisting sandwich boards. But, best intentions are quickly compromised with the least flicker of desperation.

The veteran stares at me from behind prescription sunglasses. I don't match his vision of Hawaii, or modern American, or maybe I do and that is the problem.

"Come on then," he says.

If the role were reversed, I doubt I would have given him a ride.

* * *

Sopping wet, I walk out of Makapuu Park after enduring a few cycles of the waves scrubbing me against the sand. Two local toughs leave the bus stop to stand in my path.

"You got four bucks for the bus brah?"

"Sorry," I mumble, head down and pushing on.

By the time they start cursing, I'm far enough away that they won't give chase with their sandals, fast-food guts, and pants sagging below their asses. A beat truck pulls alongside the bus stop and collects the two men. I hold my breath as the truck rambles passed. Something rushes by my head and is swallowed in the brush like startled wildlife darting for cover.

* * *

The frequency of "No Trespassing" signs means I'm nearing the beach. The neighborhood associations have decided on a conspiracy to confound tourists who wander their streets. Everyone I ask gives contradictory directions of how to access the

beach. A jogger points me a mile down the road, saying I can't miss the path, then, when I run into him two miles more, he points me back, saying I can't miss it.

The only pedestrians who return my smile are the same mentally handicapped troupe I met days before at the beach. I walk with them for a block, wondering how long it would take the orderlies to notice me.

* * *

Is it possible to be lost when you lack a destination?

* * *

On multimillion dollar plots, houses are held together with tarp and sheet metal. Many are gutted with their viscera piled in dumpsters or beneath tarps pinned down with broken cinderblocks as the structures are remodeled or salvaged before demolition. Other homes simply display the cholesterol of life clogging carports and sheds guarded by pit bulls.

Two middle-aged women with boyishly short hair load a small truck with house fixtures.

"Y'all need help?" I ask.

They agree with little argument. I make an effort to carry the heaviest of tools to load in their Toyota. They're in a rush. In a curt, New England accent, one explains that they flip houses. They tell me a standard three bedroom house like this one sells for the price of a mansion in Texas.

"Did you just get out of school?" asks the one as I carry a sink fixture to the truck.

"Yeah," I say, hoping this will lead into a job, a ride, a meal, or a daughter.

“What high school?”

The women speed away, leaving the garage door up and the front door open. I consider this as a potential place to sleep for the night but then I realize that the true owners may return at any moment. I start to run.

* * *

I swim out beyond the breakers, chasing a sea turtle, watching the animal poke its head above water then duck back into the shell of the sea, preparing to crawl back across the ocean.

Still wet from the swim, I slosh into Kualoa “Ranch” where guides offer ATV and horseback adventures of various sets used in *Jurassic Park*. I’m asked to leave because I don’t have a reservation or any plans of making one.

On the rift of dirt between road and cliff, gravel crunches under foot like joints beneath a chiropractor. Chickens dart back into the brush. I’m pinned on a road between mountains cloaked in mist and the postcard seascape. I scoff at swimmers, sunbathers, picnickers, and tourists speeding by, obliviously happy, drunk with the island’s beauty. And yet, I know I’m no more enlightened for being on this side of the road, kicking empty beer cans and using a stick to poke women’s underwear abandoned on a bush. All my high minded thoughts melt beneath the strain of pack and sun. I understand how some could find this place beautiful, but without someone to see it with, it doesn’t interest me.

* * *

The scenery becomes a collection of potential places to sleep. A chain bars the entrance to Waimanalo Bay State Park. The closed sign invites me in, promising an abandoned park void of tempting campfire smells or the sounds of happy drunks.

Too tired and hungry to check my thoughts, my empty picnic table quickly becomes an altar to Anezka. I scribble a postcard about how I find myself carrying less and less, about slipping off the road and being pin-wheeled by a car, as this is a short cut home.

Night comes and I retreat to the unlit bathroom. Cinderblock walls, scarred with misspelled curses and illegible graffiti climb nine feet to an absent roof: a vagabond's temple for worshipping the night. In the framed sky, the wind herds dark, woolly clouds. Benches line the walls and watery waste leaks from a urinal into a drain at the center of the cement floor. The moon tints the room a midnight blue. A truck fires to life at the ranger's station. It's too early to sleep but I'm too hungry to stay awake. I lie on my pack, shaking, haunted by vigilant senses and dreams of sleeping aside the road with the roar of cars constantly coming. The cinderblock walls reverberate with the pulse of waves. The wind howls over the open top. In the limbo between sleep and waking, I lie inside and out, sheltered and trapped. I clinch against my tremors, imagining being wrapped in Anezka, in her unwashed sheets and mounds of dirty clothes peppered with the crumbs of bedroom picnics. As if in a waking dream, a giant Samoan marches soundlessly into the room and stands before the urinal with his back to me. Who comes to a park restroom at four in the morning to piss when every tree is a perfect urinal? Is he a fellow squatter, a ranger, a man looking for a good time as advertised on the stall walls? Had he and his

buddies heard me snoring? Was he the scout, making sure I wasn't a wild boar before his friends flooded the changing room and taught me a lesson about disgracing sacred Hawaiian restrooms? He exits without zipping his fly or washing his hands. Was I that unnoticeable, or did he purposefully not glance at me? The wind and the crunch of leaves disguise what could be conspiratorial voices, a rifle cocking or a chain dragging across a truck bed. I lift my pack and dart into the night.

Chapter Five

The spiral slide corkscrews me down to the gravel moat beneath a rainbow colored jungle gym scuffed with black shoes and amateur graffiti. A local occupies the pay phone for an hour, threatening friends into coming to pick him up. I can't leave. Pay phones are scarce. If I miss the designated call time, Anezka's ringer will be drowned in bar noise.

When she finally picks up, rhythms of wind and traffic efface what patience remains in her voice. I hope the crackling connection erases the unsteadiness in mine, but I doubt it. Her mood preys on mine. I haven't had a conversation with anyone since the last time I called home, though that wasn't much of a conversation. I fake optimism. Exaggerated roadside misadventures pour out of me. Promises conceive more promises. I say I'd rather wander this island forever than face the possibility of living without her.

"Oh good," she says.

I say I'm like the birds that go mad over the first hint of dawn.

Silence follows each confession, pushing me to divulge more. I was never good on the phone, always impatient to get off and get back to work. Now the only difference is that I'm the one trying to tell her about all the things I find meaningless. I keep talking for fear she'll use my silence as an excuse to hang up, though all I really want to do is listen to her sing to me in the falsetto voice she uses to imitate my tone-deaf singing compulsion. I want to listen to her describe how much she misses me, to demand that I

end this absurdity and come home or she'll leave me. But I just keep telling her I love her and miss her. My sincerity degrades with each repetition. Melodrama is my only anesthesia, and its effects are losing their potency.

“You are funny,” she says.

“Can you just say what you want to say so we don't have to play this back and forth game of me trying to guess what's wrong and you say, ‘Nothing?’”

“You couldn't say you loved me for the first two years we were together. Now you're gone and you can't stop saying it. It's funny.”

The hum of the receiver amplifying silence sizzles through the line.

Anezka professed her love within a month of dating me. After I doctored her blood thigh due to a high-heeled streaking accident on the college streets, we rode a radio flyer wagon to the apartment pool where we skinny dipped on those nights when she still had a boyfriend across town; he lived too far away to satisfy her. Holding me then, Anezka told me she knew she would regret saying it, but she had to say it. I hesitated. That was the first and only time I saw her cry.

“You used to be so quiet on the phone,” she says, “always trying to type or do crunches or floss while we talked.”

“And you used to beg for me to stay on the line.”

“It's funny how that works.”

Anezka complains of loneliness, by which she means horniness. When I was home, this thought was never on her lips. Not that I'm a particularly prophetic lover, it's just that her birth control worked by neutralizing her libido. She blamed this on my lack

of romance, but now that I'm gone, she confesses an urge to have graphic sex with strangers that in no way mirrors the love-making she detailed for me when explaining why I was an impatient lover.

"I don't know how long I can hold out," she says.

Is her new suitor giving me the same courtesy I gave Anezka's ex? Is he politely declining to comment whenever she bitches about my inadequacies? Or are all of her new indictments against me coming here products of his persuasion? I should have agreed not to call, to just write postcards and believe she was at home, relishing every note.

"You're getting hornier and I'm losing my sex drive," I say. "All I think about is coming home and curling up with you."

She chuckles. "Tell me again why you left."

"If you want to blame me that's fine."

"Blame you for what?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing huh? Seriously, tell me again why you left."

"You know why."

"I don't know why."

I say I needed to journey to the end of adventure before I could settle down and be satisfied with sitting at a desk, staring down office walls, measuring seconds in keystrokes and coffee breaks.

"So you have to learn to be satisfied—with me, is that right?"

"No."

I say I need to abandon everything to see what remains. I need to be alone to understand what it means to be with her, to appreciate her, to return to those honeymoon days when all we did was sit in my apartment watching movies and old porns with plots—a time she recalls as me being at the height of my romantic bent.

“So you need to figure out how to appreciate me?”

“Whatever you want to believe.”

“Weren’t you afraid that when you left, I might realize I didn’t need you?”

“Yes.”

“So why’d you go if you want to stay with me?”

“Why would I want to stay if all it takes is a few weeks of me being gone for you to realize you can live without me?”

I swing the phone away from my mouth, letting the wind swab the receiver. I pull the phone from my ear. Anezka is the only thing tying me to a recognizable existence.

“Hello?” a muffled voice repeats through the distance between the phone and my ear.

“I’m here,” I say.

“You’re too sad all the time,” she says. “You should get out and make some new friends.”

“I should get out?”

“Get out and make some friends. I realized when you left that I miss having friends so I made some.”

* * *

“You here alone?” she asks, adjusting the wet sarong around her waist.

“Not now.”

Tourists occasionally pull into the deserted beach parks to use the bathroom or to snap pictures of the surf. Then they quickly speed off to see the rest of the island in time to make their dinner reservations. This girl stopped twice, once to use the bathroom then again to take a picture of something in the bathroom. I smiled at her each time, asking on our second encounter, “Did you miss me?”

She returned once more waving a cartoon map from her hotel.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where the North Shore is, would you?”

“North.”

She punches my shoulder then nods aggressively when I outline the route on my laminated map. Then she digs through the rattling change and breath mints in her purse, searching for a parting gift to give me. I expect a crumpled dollar. She hands me the slip from a fortune cookie.

“Thanks,” I say.

“No,” she says. “Write down your number in case we get lost again, or if you want to meet up later, or whatever.”

This is like the bad setup to the kind of porn you can order at upscale hotels. I can’t tell her I don’t have a cell phone. The prophetic bums wandering Waikiki have phones, albeit phones that only connect them to various deities and starships.

“What are you doing now?” I ask.

“Why? You want to come with us?”

“It would save you from making a long distance call when you get lost.”

I don't care if I'm putting her on the spot. If she wants to pretend that she is genuinely interested in hanging out with me, I'm calling her bluff.

“You sure you don't have any other plans?”

“Pretty sure.”

* * *

Translucent shopping bags filled with folded clothes litter the backseat like jellyfish. Sand has turned the black floor mats gray. The new-car smell is accented by a vinegary aroma, which I only discover at that moment is emanating from my shoes. It's only a matter of time before the two girls associate the smell with me.

The driver, the one who approached me, looks and acts like the plump and entitled daughter of a fading celebrity. The passenger is the no-name friend of a celebrity's daughter who thinks her flaws are masked behind obese sunglasses and a deep tan highlighting blonde facial hair. The two giggle about the digital picture Nicole took in the bathroom. No-name hands back the camera. I expect the female equivalent to the drawings and poems scrawled in men's bathroom, not a bag lady passed out on the changing room floor.

“Fucked up people pictures,” Nicole says.

“What?”

“It's for our 'Fucked Up People Pictures.' When I saw that woman, I had to take a picture. I had to. I mean, how could I not, right?”

“And who passes out in a public bathroom anyhow?” No-name asks.

“I know, right? Why didn’t she sleep on the beach? Get a little sun. Maybe not look so much like a crack-whore vampire.”

I keep catching Nicole’s fisheye sunglasses watching me in the rearview. Her nose scrunches. Right about now she’s wondering if that stench is coming from the engine or the severed heads stuffed in my pack.

“Are you writing about us?” Nicole asks.

“No,” I say, scribbling on a postcard. “I’m just keeping notes on where we’re going incase y’all try to murder me.”

Murder isn’t the best choice of topics. The two exchange a glance beneath arched eyebrows.

“What did you say you were doing in Hawaii again?” Nicole asks.

This time I’ll say something deep, something vague and abstract and layered with meaning. Something like, “I’m looking for someone,” but not so creepy, though my delay is getting far creepier.

“Just, you know, hanging out,” I say. “Partying.”

Nicole’s face explodes into laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “What was your name again?”

When I first introduced myself, they latched onto the fact that I was from Texas, asking if I lived on a ranch or rode a horse.

“John,” I say. “John Wayne.”

“Like the killer?” Nicole asks. “John Wayne Gacy?”

“No,” I say. “Like the Duke, the western movie star.”

“The Duke?”

“We don’t watch westerns,” No-name says. “We’re from California so we don’t know about westerns.”

Nicole swirls across oncoming traffic onto a dirt alcove occupied by two demolished cars propped on cinderblocks. I’m instructed to take photos of the girls posed in front of the compacted compact cars as though the girls are bikini models molesting freshly waxed hot rods. After each take they rush to the camera and grumble about how they look fat and I’m not taking the picture right. They give up on the pictures and search the cars’ interiors for souvenirs. I test the firmness of the backseat cushions and check the roofs for leaks.

Having both been to Hawaii several times with their parents, the girls’ idea of checking out the North Shore consists of scoping out the beaches with binoculars and conspicuously taking photos of breasts that could pass for flotation devices.

“My boobs are too small,” Nicole says, kneading her chest.

If she wants to blame a body part she should start with her stomach which is slowly consuming the rest of her curves.

Both girls are saving for implants. I play the gentleman and say their chests are perfect.

“What you see is the padding,” Nicole says.

“I guess I’d have to see them in their natural state,” I say, “to give an honest opinion.”

The girls snatch at each other's chests and giggle about how wild and crazy they are—how they came to Hawaii on a whim. They are both loaded with credit card debt, as their parents refuse to pay for such excursions, but life is about living in the moment, and traveling, and being free, and who cares anyhow because after their boob jobs they'll just marry the sons of rich dudes.

“When you get your boobs, you'll look like Kate Hudson,” No-name tells Nicole. “Hudson with a boob job.”

They epitomize the quintessential disposable American girls, thinking they're enticing enough to masquerade as bitches. And I'm your standard lonely asshole, condoning their behavior for the chance of some collateral affection or an exposed nipple.

“Y'all are crazy,” I say, between handfuls from their industrial-sized bag of island trail mix. “Crazy.”

After I take a sunset picture of the girls on the North Shore with some sort of European Speedo team in the background, Nicole drives us back to Honolulu through the pineapple and banana fields of the interior. They crank the radio and open the sunroof to sing along with the latest round of top ten pop songs. I haven't heard music in a few days. The beautifully manufactured rhythms cause a sudden upwelling of emotion. I mumble along to the chorus, blinking away the tears.

“This shit is bananas. B-A-N-A-N-A-S. This shit is bananas. B-A-N-A-N-A-S.”

I'm like a teeny bopper at my first concert, wailing along to absurd lyrics through streaming tears, thinking these emotions will last forever.

“Y'all are crazy,” I murmur. “Crazy.”

If I have any hope of sleeping between clean sheets and exposed breasts, I can't mention Anezka.

I mention Anezka. She's a complete buzz kill. I couldn't help it. Nicole was blabbering about how she's here scouting colleges for marine biology. She wants to major in recording new age whale songs or in teaching dolphins not to hump their trainers—jobs suitable for the quirky love interest in a romantic comedy. It's impossible for me not to mention that Anezka entered college for marine biology as a junior when she was seventeen, and that now, at nineteen, she's shopping for graduate schools. I explain how Anezka wants to extract drugs from the types of marine life that animal rights protesters can't depict sympathetically on posters: sponges, algae blooms, and phytoplankton. Her career plan is to become a professor at a division one school in order to secure season football tickets and a perpetual harem of graduate assistants. She has no delusions about saving the planet. So long as people think they can save the world through unconditional compassion rather than birth control, the planet is fucked, which is why Anezka is considering studying natural products that can be developed into chemical weapons. I'm simultaneously proud and jealous of her natural intelligence, her advantage of growing up as a single child in a household with parents involved in plotting her future, and her genuine want to work in a high paying job where she performs repetitive tasks. At times I'm even envious of her complete lack of desire for fame and glory. Other times I wonder what would motivate me to do anything if American pop culture hadn't instilled in me a need to be loved and by legions of screaming teenage fans.

“So your girlfriend is cool with you coming here to party?” Nicole asks.

My confession of long distance love doesn't drive them mad with jealousy as I had hoped.

“Well it's not like she's just sitting at home waiting for me.”

“What, are y'all swingers?”

“I mean, we have an understanding.”

“Sure you do, John,” Nicole says. “And what's your understanding?”

“I understand that she'll most likely cheat on me and leave me while I'm out here.”

My self-pity fails to ignite their raging lust.

“Well, John, why the hell would she stay with you if you're out here partying all day with hot bitches?”

Nicole laughs into the wheel. “Is she even real John, or are you just stalking some random girl.”

“Yeah,” No-name adds. “She's all like, ‘Who the fuck keeps sending me postcards from Hawaii?’”

Nicole's attention shifts sharply to fudge, which she needs pronto. She zooms ahead of sightseeing traffic, swerving over the double yellow on blind passes, determined to get her money's worth on the rental car's insurance policy. I fantasize about spending a week in the hospital, with my jaw too bruised for me to explain myself while a sultry Hawaiian nurse in a coconut bra gives me sponge baths. The girls each buy a meal's worth of fudge for more money than I've spent the entire trip.

* * *

Their hotel room is a cubicle perched high above paradise loaded with family packs of dried fruit, cheese crackers, and fruit candy—travel food meant for long physical excursions. Nicole says she needs to shower, but not in a sexy, I’m-so-dirty way, but in an I-need-to-wash-the-sand-out-of-my-ass way. I need a shower but am afraid to bring it up. It turns out I don’t need to ask. No-name suggests I go before her because her hair treatment plan takes awhile.

The shower is the first time I’ve been naked since arriving on the island. I consider rubbing one out so I won’t be as tempted when I walk out into the topless pillow fight, but I rush through the lather process, for fear the girls are venturing into my pack to read what I wrote about them. Feeling clean and trim, I emerge in less than a minute wearing a towel. My intention is to renew their lust with my starved musculature. They can’t be distracted from the entertainment channels’ 100 hottest celebrities and their running debate on what plastic surgeries the stars have had.

“I’m thinking of getting breast enhancements too,” I say, drawing attention to my chest.

“Naw,” Nicole says without looking over. “Get a nose job.”

* * *

Tourist shops slump in the shadows of glowing liquor stores and night club signs. The open air grills have become bars blasting Jimmy Buffet and Bob Marley. Clumps of sailors in white uniforms whistle from across the street. White guys pose in tank tops that showcase crosses tattooed over fast-food fed biceps. Others lean against walls, sipping from spiked gas station fountain drinks, tracking the progress of women from behind

shades. The girls photograph it all, leaving me to defuse fights with men yelling at me to control my bitches. They turn their camera to the feeble: bodies molded to benches, women selling roses folded from palm fronds, and abandoned drunks communing with telephone poles.

The girls shadow an aggressive street walker in a short black dress and crinkles of blonde hair accentuating her movements. From the back, she's an inflated version of Elizabeth Shue with blurry tribal band tattoos circling her upper thigh. She's stout and sturdy like a female cop prepared to deliver or receive a beating without missing a step in undersized high heels. The girls want to grab her enormous breasts. They snap pictures from behind, giggling each time men mistakenly think they are so compellingly handsome that a random woman would grab them on the street and ask if they wanted to go somewhere private without expecting to get paid for it. Her hustling tactics seem too stereotypical, like they've been lifted from a movie involving a prostitute and an unlikely suitor, where a bubble bath absolves STDs and the mental defect or drug habit that led her to the streets.

"You like to party?" she asks me. Burst blood vessels explode from her pupils.

"Yeah he does," No-name says. "All John does is party."

The woman stares at No-name. "Sorry," she says. "Didn't know he's with you."

"He's not with us," No-name says.

Shue looks at me.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm broke."

"We can spot you some money," Nicole says.

“Fucking whores,” the woman mumbles before crossing the street without checking for cars.

“Did she just call us whores?” Nicole asks.

Neither is quick enough to think of a response beyond the obvious.

Before we get anywhere in the vicinity of a strip club, which the girls claim they were kicked out of the night before, they begin complaining about their feet hurting and their stomachs aching. We wander in and out of upscale Hawaiian restaurants until they settle on Denny’s. They don’t need menus. Nicole orders an ice-cream Sundae and a bagel with extra cream cheese. She’s not that hungry. No-name gets a turkey sandwich though she hates turkey. Neither finishes half her meal. They push their plates to me.

“Come on, John,” they say. “You’re broke. Eat up. We insist. You need all the energy you can get for all the partying you’ll be doing tonight.”

I stare at the food mashed into gelatinous piles like the bowls of scraps my grandmother used to feed her farm dog. Since the moment we entered Denny’s, I could taste every meal. The aerosol of butter clings to the back of my throat. I bite my lip and shake my head.

“Come on. You’re homeless John. When else you going to eat with such style?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

* * *

Food-drunk, the girls kiss each others’ cheeks and squeeze chests while they confess how they wish they could marry each other. I’m busy visualizing my plan to hustle them. I’ll slip into the liquor store to buy a bottle of pineapple rum on their credit

cards. Hysterically drunk, we'll stumble into their room and fall on the bed in a tangle of limbs. We'll lean over the balcony, kissing, as the waves thunder below, erasing drunken howling and shattered bottles rising from the alleys. Lace curtains ripped from the rod will mute flesh. Chocolate covered strawberries and candles will multiply on the floor. I'll trace ice over curves of tanned and toned skin as guttural moans slip beneath the rising thud of beat-heavy rhythms. Nicole will artfully conceal herself in covers while No-name will go full frontal. In the morning, while they still smile in sleep with faces and hair attended in the night by cosmetology fairies, I'll rest a note on the nightstand written in calligraphy. Neither will check to see if I stole anything. Anyone who can make love as passionately as me, who writes such a poetic note, about how we were like the three-headed monster of love, only needs to steal hearts to thrive in this world.

"Where you sleeping tonight John?" Nicole asks as she flips on the TV and flops on the bed beside No-name.

"The beach," I say, hefting my pack.

"Wait." Nicole searches through her purse. Loose change clinks against her camera. "We have to take a picture with you first."

* * *

A bum sleeps under my palm tree. I find another and shiver through the night. Dreams stream by as translucent and transitory as the clouds. A landscape of wind, light, and insects grazes on my exposed strips of skin. The hiss and sputter of sprinklers chase me across the park every half hour. The crescendo and decrescendo of sirens serenades me. All is as it should be.

Chapter Six

“Who’s this?”

“It’s me.”

“Oh. I wasn’t expecting you to call today.”

“I know. It’s just. I don’t know.”

“Alright.”

“It’s just, sometimes I don’t know what I’m doing with myself out here, you know?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I was thinking about trying to get a job. To meet people. Give me something to do.”

“I thought you went out there to get away from routine.”

“You think I should come home?”

“Why are you asking me? You’re the one who chose to leave. I didn’t understand why you wanted to go in the first place.”

“I know.”

“I mean, you know I’ll be in Port Aransas all summer, so, I don’t care what you do.”

* * *

A gelatinous Samoan in a grass skirt and reed hat pounds a drum of leather stretched over a hollow log. Tribal tattoos crisscross his chest, mixing Hawaiian words with pop culture hieroglyphs: Mickey Mouse's bust, a Nike swoosh, and the Oakland Raiders logo. The guttural boom and the constant scatter of clapping cheers on Triathlon competitors circling the street. The noise follows me down alleys cramped with kiosks full of souvenirs—replica relics of an invented past: bobbling dashboard hula dolls, plastic ukuleles, and coconuts carved into gorilla faces. An animatronic fortune teller advises me to insert a dollar and follow my destiny. I use the money to catch the bus.

“Filthy, filthy, filthy,” mutters a man lavished in a musk of cigarettes and piss.

He's an Old Testament prophet obsessively muttering about the unclean, how all things maketh thee unclean, and how all unclean souls must be banished. With both our ragged packs piled between our legs, we look like the mad mailmen of the apocalypse, persisting in old world rituals, delivering dead messages to no one. My associate tells me I owe him money. To prove it he motions to something stubby he's gripping in his pocket.

“About that,” I say. “Can I borrow some more? I need to buy some floss.”

He makes a jerking motion with whatever he's gripping in his pocket. I sit watching, until he turns to scan the empty bus for a more sympathetic audience.

Drenched in a patchwork of ragged fashions, a native bag lady named Auntie Jolene drags on two rattling trash bags full of crushed cans. A sludge of stale beer and syrupy soda trail the black plastic bundles.

“You can’t be bringing rubbish on the bus Jolene,” says the female driver. “And these rides ain’t free.”

“Bless you cousin,” Aunty Jolene says, making a psychotic imitation of a priestly gesture.

I leave my riding partner for a seat adjacent the driver, a middle-aged Asian woman with shoulder length hair and a robust build beneath her tight uniform. Her reaction to my questions of where I should go is muted by small, sporty shades.

“Where you want to go?” she asks.

“Sacred Falls?”

“Nope. It’s forbidden.”

“Forbidden. It’s actually sacred?”

“Sacred? No. A rock slide killed some tourists up there a few years back. They closed it after that.”

A version of this story surrounds every waterfall I ask locals about. Perhaps rock slide is a euphemism for “tourist hate crime,” or maybe these threats are simply the locals’ way of preventing tourists from tracking trail mix wrappers, drug store flip flops, and hotel towels on their natural wonders. Were they protecting these gems for future generations? What would tourists visit hundreds of years from now? Perhaps they would travel along roped-off paths behind our current roped-off pathways. Synthetic bikini tops, beach balls, and disposable cameras would be preserved behind glass at the visitors’ centers with detailed accounts of how the primitives used these ceremonial objects to worship falling water gods. The Hawaiian natives of the future would get tribal-band

tattoos of the brands of our disposable culture: Coca-Cola or Evian written in Old English.

“Where should I go then?”

“Kauai,” she says checking the gas as if to see if she had enough to drive to the other island. “It’s more laid back. Not as many crazies. Only problem is the buses aren’t good.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say. “But where can I go on this island.”

She jerks the bus to a stop and admits a new rider. “Best view is right here. You can see the whole island for a few bucks” The bus cuts back into traffic.” Plus you get to sit next to me.”

Was she hitting on me? I shouldn’t have told her I was seventeen to get the student rate.

She lists destinations on Oahu like bus stops, and warns me not to camp on the west side where the locals do more than just throw beer bottles at white tourists.

“Of course you could always stay at my house,” she says, her dead pan expression fixed on the road like an animatronic comedian.

She punches the brakes even though no one has pulled the stop request chord. Stopped, she rips off a handful of transfer slips.

“The Polynesian Cultural Center.” She points across the road then hands me the excessive number of transfer slips.

“Is it any good?”

She shrugs. “Tourists always want to go there. Plus it’s run by BYU, so there’s plenty of white college girls for you.”

I climb off and stand on the curb looking back up at her.

“I drive this route every weekday,” she says.

“Okay.”

“If you ever need anything.”

I smile and so does she. I never know if middle-aged women are attracted to me or if my deceptively juvenile face activates their motherly instincts.

Across an expanse of asphalt, the Polynesian Cultural Center stands like a thatch roof cathedral. Tall palms sway over effigies of Hawaiian gods scrawled into imitation rock. The grass is maintained well enough to serve as a putting green, as though this spot is part of an immense Hawaiian themed putt-putt golf course that spans the entire island. I don’t have the money to wander the dark corridors resonating with electronically narrated history, the hum of air-conditioning, and the concoction of tourists lathered in fragrant lotions. I walk north.

* * *

Chickens and stray cats guard the abandoned pay station at the back entrance of Malaekahana State Recreational Area. Battered cars are scattered about the lot. Picnic tables and tents bubble up beneath streamers of light twirling through the canopy. Sand and grass sprout between pine needles and cement walkways. Campers congregate around tables overloaded with condiments and family packs of food in plastic wrap.

Bursts of acoustic guitars, radio blips, and laughter crackle around fires. The scent of smoked sausage flavors my jerky sandwich.

Outside, the night is unavoidable, erasing the landscape and all my ambitions. At eight I bed down on the abandoned side of the park, on a stone bench circling a charcoal pit. A thatch roof covers the structure, trapping the residue of charred meat and smoke. My headlamp illuminates the laws of Leviticus regarding the proper procedures for cutting and marinating animal sacrifices. These directions read like massive barbecuing recipes, provoking starved memories of the various cuts of steak grilled beside Anezka's pool on shirtless summer Sundays.

Rain snuffs out the fireside chatter of scattered campers. It blows sideways through the pit and drips off the thatch on my forehead. Thoughts shift to detailed blue prints for our house, a castle, raised from stones dug out of the rock shelves feet beneath the Texas topsoil.

To keep warm, I do pushups and dips on the bench. Routine has always been my salvation, and my undoing. I invent rituals, however grand or small, to fend off the ever encroaching chaos. This compulsion is not all bad. Routine provides meaning and purpose. But, for those like my father who have the compulsion to ritualize everything, these routines and superstitions become their religion, even when they rationally know better. Like all extreme personality traits, this desire is not without its virtues. Without some order, we would face the same fears afresh each day. Without stereotypes, we would treat each stranger with a certain amount of fear. I'm no longer intrigued by the dead-end possibilities that exist on the open road. Here, with all my basic needs stripped,

I crave routine, to be full, dry, and surrounded by body heat. I want to have a position, a hole to stash my things. I want to be known, to be shown around, to be liked and missed. I want to be envied by tourists and asked by vacationing women to show them around. I want to be established, however temporary, to spend my days building toward something tangible, however insignificant, instead of constructing futures from rain or the residue of fire pits. I want, which is to say, I don't possess, and yet, for all I want, I know what waits for me on the other side of satisfaction. As soon as my primal concerns are met, that same luxurious wanderlust will work to undo me. The inertia of the human spirit pushes us on, to hurdle through the void for no other reason than to occupy the empty space.

* * *

The same motorcycle cop cruises by. I lift my can of cold pork and beans as a toast, then slurp the syrup at the bottom. As long as I'm moving, I'm legal. Transience is a crime of the stationary.

The North Shore's seaside towns pileup along Kamehameha. Mansions clutter the sandy streets like beach vines springing up in clusters, fighting for space, all connected by a subterranean system, all copies of each other. White faces appear with more frequency beyond the glare of car windows rolling by. I now appreciate why skin color is one of the fundamental forms of identity. We take comfort in faces that look like ours, in the hope of finding common ground. The majority of these locals are expatriates from California who moved to Hawaii to reconnect with their spiritual, earthy side in ocean front condos—the kind of people who appreciate drifters like me as cultural ambassadors. Some moved here to surf in the sixties and have made millions selling land. The younger

ones are the Rastafarians, surfers, and drug dealing refugees from Malibu, living bohemian lifestyles on trust funds. They wear board shorts that cost more than all the clothes I carry and stock their pantries with organic produce purchased on an island where a generic loaf of bread cost as much as mainland buffet.

I want to be one of them.

I want to ride beach cruisers barefoot while balancing a thousand dollar surfboard in one hand.

I want to walk tiny dogs with tough names and nod to other locals.

Even the homeless here are more attractive. Wrapped in a vibrant sarong, Aunty Jolene stands barefoot on a bus stop, joyfully preaching to me about a dead man she knows. On this side of paradise, she isn't crazy. She's a ragged mystic speaking in tongues through the Eucharist of methamphetamines, preaching the happy destruction of all human endeavors.

* * *

Reggae rhythms infused with techno beats lure me off the highway to a sturdy wooden shack with a sheet metal roof. Plywood boards advertise the vibrant hand-painted names, Naughty Nectar and Mocean. A pack of boys in only swim trucks chase each other around the red dirt yard, knocking over rusted beach cruiser bicycles. Aluminum tins offer the soggy remains of seaweed salad, fried taro roots, and canisters of poi looking like translucent Jello shots or organic lube. Patchouli oil, incense, and pot smoke waft out open air windows, mingling with shirtless surfers who pull back their dirty blonde dreadlocks, drink dark beer, and roll Natural American Spirits organic tobacco. A

boy sits for a henna tattoo of a multi-headed deity. Women in sweat clouded bikini tops swoosh in and out. My senses are overwhelmed. My mind creates composite characters composed of the best aspects of each person. The place becomes a movie version of a California party house in the 60s, crowded with the kind of free loving “flower children” featured in *Playboy* as opposed to hairy junkies begging in Golden Gate Park. Although dirty and a drifter, I can’t pass for a new age hippie. At most, I’m a displaced, imitation beatnik, looking for love, adventure, and poetic insights along the road and in coffee shops. I do not belong, but I can at least understand these fellow pretenders who find meaning in foreign religions, defunct social movements, and a sport, surfing, with no clear objectives or rules. I slip off my pack and rest it against the shack before climbing the stairs to the shop crowded with bony bodies lacking clothes and racks of clothes lacking bodies.

“Check out these pants,” says a woman with knee-length, gray hair. “Feel that. *Feel it.* Hundred percent organic hemp. These things are flipping radical, know what I mean. You need these pants. Only a hundred bucks.”

I back down the stairs a few steps, squirming in my synthetic khakis. I’m back in high school, drowning in oversized pants designed to hide insignificant erections. I’m on a wrestling mat, afraid the nervous drops of urine have bled through reinforced layers of underwear and spandex.

“You know if y’all are hiring?” I ask.

“Hiring? Like a job?” The term seemed to confuse her.

“Yeah. Like work.”

“Oh, I don’t work here,” she says. “You need to talk to Britney.”

I wait on the porch afraid of the chaos that awaits me in the store. A similar pair of hemp pants emerges from the dim interior, sagging below the upper rim of Britney’s bikini zone. The bottom of her purple tank top is doubled over her surgically reinforced chest, accentuating a smooth, tan belly crinkled with lightning-bolt stretch marks.

“You’re the kid looking for work?”

I nod.

“Right on. I’m looking for someone to make smoothies from seven to noon.” She eyes my clothes, stopping on my running shoes. “You aren’t from around here huh?”

“No.”

“Just bumming it, huh?” She lights a cigarette and studies me through the smoke.

“Right on.”

“If it’s possible, I’d be interested in working out some sort of room and board deal, if that’s something you’re interested in.”

“I just split from my ex’s place. Bad noise.” She searches for a place to flick her ash and settles on a flower pot. “Real asshole, you know. Vowed I’d never live with another dude, except my son.”

“Oh.

“You can probably crash on my couch though. You seem harmless.” The cigarette dangles from the side of her mouth, animating her speech. “I already promised the job to this chick, but you know. I’m getting a good vibe from you.”

I stand grinning, unsure how to respond. Is the conversation over? I keep expecting her to fetch an application that will reveal my lack of smoothie experience, a phone, address, or social security number.

“So should I come back later then?”

“Sure.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Right on.”

“When?”

“Whenever.”

* * *

To prepare for a job as a homeless person, it's imperative to have fresh clothes. For this purpose, douse your clothes in a healthy swab of organic Castile soap and scrub it against your boney body to clean both at once. Then, stand in synthetic boxer briefs, wringing excess water from your clothes. Make sure to enjoy the peppermint fresh scent of pure hemp oil. Hang each article of clothing to dry on the edge of a picnic table. Likely you will not have a towel because of the bulk and the mildew stench it creates in your pack. To keep warm in the chilly ocean breeze as you wait for the clothes to dry, exercise on the picnic table. If any park rangers stop to observe you, just throw a few phantom punches and kicks to convince them that you are merely training for some extreme sport for which only underwear is allowed. Rest assured that no authority figure will want to deal with a wiry and jerky homeless person in only his underwear.

When your clothes have dried and you are dressed for the night, scrub your feet in the beach showers. Bible enthusiasts will see this as a significant act. In reality, Jesus constantly washed his feet because of the grubby soot covering the feet of pedestrian travelers. As a walker, you will know no greater pleasure than the sensation of fresh feet slipping into clean, dry socks. To prevent your fresh clothes from getting dirty and wrinkled, sleep on the seat of the stone picnic table. As you lie on this pedestal as an offering to the night wind, you may shiver, which in turn keeps you awake and thinking about your hunger, the woman you left, and the wisdom of agreeing to be tied down to a job while you are trying to lead an adventurous existence. Avoid grinding your teeth or chewing the inside of your lip. Instead, try grating your knuckles against the grainy cement. Sleep.

* * *

The wind keeps off sleep, pushing islands of gray over the moon. It must be the wind keeping me awake, or the leaves beneath the barrier of seaside trees that constantly crinkle with the footsteps of cats, chickens, and rats. Or the insect songs chirping like alarm clock bursts through thin apartment walls. Like a sleeping companion's unsteady breath, the breeze ignites a rash of goose bumps and convulsions that bounce my head against my cement pillow.

Barefoot, I run sprints through the empty meadow, trampling grass, expecting thorns and rocks but finding neither. My lungs strain and thoughts thin. I close my eyes close and run, vaulting face first into the dark. I spread my arms in a theatrical martyr's pose, but there's nothing and no one to hold me up or watch me fall. I race phantoms.

* * *

The door to Mocean and Naught Nectar is locked despite the posted operating hours: seven to seven. I head back to the road. The plywood and two-by-four door drags against the floor, revealing a man who looks like a model for surf wear. In only untied board shorts sagging well below where his tan line should have been, he pushes back wavy, sun bleached hair to get his first look at the day's surf breaking beyond the pines. He stretches against a post, showcasing the full range of a body chiseled, sanded, and stained by surfing.

“Is Britney around?”

“Britney!” he yells into the shop while rearranging his loose genitals.

Britney emerges in a man's surf shirt and a new ball cap manufactured to look worn.

“You're early?”

“I thought y'all open at seven.”

“What time is it?” she says through a yawn.

“Ten.”

“Ten, Jason,” Britney says, nudging the surfer's shoulder. “You kept me up till ten.”

“Better get going then.” Jason smacks her ass, hops down the stairs, and pounds my back as he passes.

“It’s a good thing you came back,” Britney says. “My psychic friend predicted that I’d have an unexpected blessing this morning.” She nods, waiting for me to appreciate the prophecy.

“Are you talking about me or Jason?”

Her mind is still consumed in the reverie of Jason’s ass bouncing away.

“I told myself I’d offer you the job if you came back.”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Right on,” Britney says, flicking her cigarette then walking back into the shack.

I remain in the yard. Framed by the opened door, Britney pulls her t-shirt over her head, and readjusts the front of her bikini top.

“Come on,” she says, waving me in.

I climb the stairs.

Chapter Seven

“One day this could all be yours,” Britney says, motioning to the blender, freezer, and bulky register that compose Naught Nectar—the smoothie counter in the back corner of Mocean.

Money, or at least the idea of an endless stream of funds, flows around the island like liquid karma, continuously replenished by each plane-full of vacationers. Tourist dollars fuel Oahu’s high percentage of entrepreneurs like Britney who would be nothing more than hobbyists or kiosk operators stateside. Some actually subsist solely by selling fishing line necklaces, poorly painted coconuts, or massages with spiritual happy endings. Here, “natural” drinks are big business, partially because the ease with which fruit grows on the island stunted Hawaiian cuisine. Visitors in search of authentic fast food have the option between organic smoothies and Spam musubi—a brick of sushi style Spam taped to rice with dried seaweed.

For my job responsibilities, Britney points to a chalkboard filled with multicolored names like Mellow Mango, Bitching Berry, and Tropical Tart. The ingredients consist of the frozen cubes of fruit, chocolate syrup, various types of milk, a gallon of ice cream, apple cider, honey, and a patch of wheat grass. The only button Britney knows how to work on the register is “no sale.” I’m told not to worry about trifles like taxes or wearing a shirt. The landlord is a ring leader in the push for Hawaiian sovereignty, which apparently exempts us from state regulations.

Within fifteen minutes, Britney leaves me alone in the shop. To be fair, this is the least demanding job I've ever held—a discouraging fact considering it's the first job I've landed since college graduation. After spending my entire working career climbing the ranks of the food service industry, the same week I graduated I also quit my job running food in fancy restaurant. To solidify my resolve never to work in the food industry again, I ran through the parking lot naked, covered in congealed bisque the cooks dumped on me as a going away present.

* * *

“Only two hours late today,” announces a tall, lanky woman who walks in without looking at me. She immediately opens the register on the retail side of the store. “I told Sean and Liam to tell their teachers it was car trouble.”

She looks like an ex-runway model with sun damage; her bronze and freckled skin matches tarnished hair that ripples over dark roots.

“You're not Britney,” she says.

“Britney had to buy snorkeling equipment. Said she'll be back in an hour. I'm working for her.”

“Oh,” she says, studying her opened register. “And she left you here all alone on your first day?”

I nod.

“Well I guess that means we can trust you.”

Her name is Calista and I'm Sal. With the lack of smoothie customers I help Calista set up displays of hemp jewelry, pipes, and crystals. She explains how fate brought me to their doorstep.

"Britney was desperate for someone—" she cuts herself short to consider the adjective with which to describe me. "Helpful," she finally says.

"All things happen for a reason," Calista says.

"It does seem that way when you look back on them."

"Totally. It's all part of a divine plan."

For me, fate is just another belief that constructs order out of the universal shuffle, but I agree that it's an appealing concept. Fate instructed Calista to sell her shop in Malibu, which burned down just a few days ago.

"I got the same bad feeling about Robbie's place," she says, as if my presence on the island ensures that I have a fundamental understanding of who Robbie is. "That's why I had to leave."

"You ever hear about that guy who was arrested for setting fires to fulfill his prophecies." Calista studies the spectrum projected from a glass crystal. "That's my kind of prophet. Out there, making it happen."

"I'm part psychic you know."

"I could guess that about you," I said.

"Are you psychic too!?"

Calista's wide eyes make me want to say yes, but I'm trying to be honest about the fact that I'm not special. "Wouldn't you be able to sense it if I was?"

“Of course,” Calista says. “We psychics just have so much to think about that sometimes we get things confused. Like if something is a memory or a prediction.”

She slings open the mosquito netting hanging over the futon mattress behind the register and punches the dented pillows.

“I have that same problem. I mix my memories with the future, but neither one seem very real” I say. “There’s something I’ve always wondered about psychics. How do you keep from judging people for the terrible things they’re going to do? Is it like a psychic code that you have to act surprised?”

With a ding, Calista empties her register and slams it shut.

“Would you mind watching my side of the store for a few minutes,” she says, sweeping back her hair. “I forgot a few things at Robbie’s.”

Perhaps the gift of foresight limits one’s hindsight, or maybe psychics just have extraordinarily bad memories degraded by drugs or abuse, which makes them see the projected future constructed from scraps of the past and present as premonitions. It’s the same for people on hallucinogens who forget the logical connections between thoughts and sensations, and end up seeing God miming to them in a toilet bowl.

Calista storms back in with a red container half filled with gasoline for the lawnmower. She calls a friend and explains how she forgot that her battery is dead. She needs a jump. My gifts of foresight predict I’ll be alone in the shop for hours.

And I am, struggling to find the common thread between the mélange of freethinking, counterculture, and spiritual consumer goods that clutter the shop. Strings of rainbow Tibetan prayer flags bounce in the open-air breeze, venting the musk of scented

incense, tobacco, candles, and pot. Hawaiian flags billow below panels of florescent lights. Reggae pumps from a dusty stereo buried beneath stacks of scratched CDs and cracked cases. The two-by-fours framing the walls are ornamented with wooden masks of ceremonies long forgotten, bamboo wind chimes, native bowls, and signed surfing posters curled at the ends. Surfboards lean in the corner, blistered with wax. Finger paintings of seascapes sell for more than the realistic paintings Anezka's father makes of Texas grasslands—paintings that take him weeks to produce each individual blade of grass. Fresh flowers droop out of the lopsided products of introductory pottery classes. Ivy drips from cracked drink pitchers. See-through summer clothes flutter like interpretive dancers over plywood floors painted in zebra stripes. Glass cases contain energy crystals, healing stones, and blown glass pipes. Plastic action heroes lie dead over a reed throw rug at the foot of a dusty bookshelf stacked with children's stories and self help books marketed as eastern spiritualism. Sand collects in corners. Sunset colored throw pillows cover a bench cut from a split log and a bamboo framed sofa. Perhaps the cosmic connection between all of these items is a universal want, which manifests itself in most Americans as a need to consume. It is the same with me, but the shop contains very little that I want. Over the litanies of who begot who in the Old Testament, my gaze drifts out the trap door windows the ocean accented by a mirage glimmering on the road.

* * *

Calista's noon replacement, Naomi, is a less seasoned version of Calista, with skin and hair shaped by the sun and surf. Her Christian upbringing is infused with hipster mysticism and coloring book versions of eastern spiritualism. In her New Zealand accent,

Naomi explains how she works here because it isn't corporate. She isn't like the trust fund bums on the North Shore, she says. She has an impressive mound of credit card debt and student loans. She's only part-time, which is good considering she spends her entire paycheck on Mocean clothes. Her real profession is photography. Her black and white photos of Thailand in the wake of the 2004 tsunami hang from the rafters like articulate versions of the Tibetan prayer flags. Tiny white labels price them in the hundreds.

"So much has happened since I moved here after helping the relief effort in Thailand," she says.

Along with discovering that surfing is her life, she served as an extra on two dramatic TV shows filmed on the North Shore. One concerned the knotted romances among a group of surfers while the other followed the schizophrenic adventures of plane crash survivors lost on a tropical island.

"Meet anyone famous?" I ask, wondering which vacationing celebrity will befriend me.

* * *

Britney returns around three with her tank top folded over her chest and Jason's long jeans sagging passed her ass crack. She slips me the ten dollars from the tip jar and her son Sean's leftover sandwich.

"I guess I should head back to my campsite soon," I say.

"Why don't you stay on my couch," she says. "Plenty of room."

"You sure?"

“Sure,” she says, tugging up her pants and harvesting the money in the register.
“And since you don’t have to waste an hour riding the bus, would you mind filling in for me while I make a quick run to Jason’s?”

* * *

Britney’s apartment is a flop house that smells of forgotten litter boxes and plastic bags synched around fast food trash. Plastic soldiers lie abandoned on the floor with missing limbs and sand crusted joints. Black mold and seven empty shampoo bottles line the shower. A chest high partition divides the living room from the single bedroom.

“The place was a complete mess when I moved in,” Britney explains when she walks in just after midnight with her son, Sean, asleep in her arms. “Haven’t had a chance to clean yet.”

She dumps Sean in bed, opens the wine cooler in her pocket and clears a space on the tile floor to lie down. From the floor, she cranks the boom box and immediately falls asleep.

The door creaks open.

“Hey neighbor,” Naomi says, high stepping over Britney and through the clutter.

With her back to me, Naomi changes into threadbare nightwear and lies down on the couch opposite me.

I fall asleep without effort. My dreams are vacant, disturbed only by Britney slipping out the door.

* * *

Most afternoons I run the sidewalks of the North Shore and exercise on picnic tables. I dive with swimming goggles, taking huge breaths to watch the underside of waves explode on the three flat volcanic rocks that mitigate the surf at Three Tables Beach. Farther out, and deeper each time, I navigate the fluctuating seascape of rocks and sea urchins until a striped black and white eel grazes my arm, sending me to the surface where I gasp and gulp and drag myself to shore. Hawaii is full of snakes, they just haven't crawled onto land yet.

Waikiki tourists snap sunset photos before slapping off sand, wadding towels, and piling in cars to beat traffic back to the city. The sun unfurls spools of golden hair over the water, like bioluminescent seaweed stretching to entangle me.

Most days I return to the shop, to fill in for Britney, or for an excuse to be near people. The coming night wind fills the dresses with full female forms that dance and fret in the light of the sun setting fire to the coastline pines.

A land of coconut milk and organic honey swishes in my belly. Regulars unload stories, calling me dude and man. I nod. No one will be impressed by my road story, no matter what distances I cover. They don't care if I believe they surfed two-story waves last winter. They recite these adventures to remind themselves why they are here. I must learn from them, learn to be satisfied with my own story, to repeat it to myself over and over until I believe it. No one, including me, wants to hear about a life in which the main tragedy is that there is no real tragedy. They don't want to hear about how I'm love-starved for a woman across the sea who's losing interest in me, a woman who I know is not my key to finding happiness here. We glamorous want lies to put us to bed.

* * *

I rush to the phone each time it rings. Bill collectors want to know when Britney will be back. The phone company informs me that Britney's cell phone has been shut off. Sean's school counselor calls, suggesting Britney wake at a usual hour. The shop's landlord calls, telling me that he'll find a new renter if we don't start opening on time. They all want to know who I am, who is listening to them: husband, boyfriend, son.

"Just an acquaintance," I say.

They leave complicated messages and ask me to repeat their instructions and remind me how important this communication is. Britney accepts these notes and asks if there's anything else.

* * *

"Why do you never call me?"

"Why should I have to? You're the one who left me, remember?"

Anezka and I had never really argued before I came here, though to listeners this wasn't much of a fight. At home, I was too passive aggressive and she simply didn't care enough for us to argue. With me here, this is the first time I have to work to convince her to like me and all I have are my pathetic promises and proclamations, my postcards detailing how I can't appreciate this place, how the fish are nameless smudges, without her here to name these wonders and explain everything's place in the submerged world.

"I don't want to argue," she says. "It's nothing you're saying. It's just that every time I hear your voice I get pissed off."

"What do you want me to say?"

Her breath seethes across the receiver. “Why don’t you try talking fucking dirty to me? At least then I could feel something.”

“I can’t”

“Come on. Say all that silly shit about how much you love me, just say it like how much you want to fuck me.”

“There are people here.”

“Fuck! Can you at least try humming into the receiver or something?”

“People are watching me. Customers.”

Calista walks into the shop and studies me listening to the dead line. She gives me a funny look when I set the phone on the receiver without saying goodbye to anyone.

“Who was that?”

“No one.”

“Oh,” she says, looking around the shop. “Where is everyone else?”

* * *

A shadow appears in the walk-up window, darkening my reading of the Hebrews wandering through the desert, losing track of the seasons and years, hallucinating on manna and inventing new gods to forsake them.

A girl with short blonde hair and tired eyes—a tomboy version of me—leans into the window, looking beyond me.

“Any idea when Britney will be back?” she asks. “I was supposed to train with her today.”

This is the girl I replaced. She is my escape. She can still replace me and I can become just another bum hanging around the store. I am selfish to remain, to take her job when I know my presence here is impermanent.

“No idea,” I say.

“Should I come back or wait?” she asks. “What do you think? What should I do?”

“I wish I knew.”

Chapter Eight

Like all recent converts to the church of surf, Orlando can't stop preaching his liquid faith. He comes in for coffee at least twice a day, and stays to describe the epic waves he rode yesterday and surf trips he'll take tomorrow. When the sea is flat he stays in the shop for hours, flipping through old surf magazines and petting his wispy mustache and goatee while waiting for buddies or odd jobs. Phones are rare among this sect, as residents merely meet up and go with the flow. Like all disciples of surf, Orlando wears brand name board shorts, and carries a mild scent of body funk. His surf-scrubbed tan accents scattered tattoos of a Celtic knot, a shell, and a cross topped with the Star of David. His bronzed hair is beginning to dread, drooping over his lanky frame. Like Naomi, he never surfed before moving here. He originally arrived on the North Shore with the intent of becoming a professional skydiver. Now, a born-again surfer, he speaks of material things like work and a home in metaphysical terms—as existing only in the future tense.

“What about you brah?” Orlando asks when he finishes preaching the gospel of waves. “What’s your story? What are you doing here?”

“You’re looking at it.” He seems offended. For him, working at a juice bar would be a sure sign of spiritual and moral bankruptcy, if only I actually made money doing it.

“I’ve always wanted to learn how to surf,” I add. “Thought this might be a good place to start. Just haven’t found anyone to take me out yet.”

“Oh brah! You have to learn.” Orlando blows on cold coffee he has yet to sip.
“I’ll take you sometime.”

“Cool. Jen is supposed to be back in an hour. We should go then.”

“Man, you should have come yesterday. The waves were going off.”

Orlando’s attention shifts to Vin, who lugs an armful of lumber inside. “You hear that Vin? You should have been surfing with me yesterday. It was epic.”

“That right?” Vin says dumping the lumber on the prayer rug where Calista’s Rottweiler sleeps.

Orlando’s eyes track Vin as he retrieves lumber and power tools from the bed of his black diesel truck, nearly too large to fit on the narrow Hawaiian streets. Vin sports short, sharp, black curls, a matching goatee, and big tan muscles highlighted by tattoos, like a stylized sea turtle. His business is cutting down trees that blot out ocean views. But, he’s taking the day off to assemble a bed frame for Calista so she doesn’t have to share the futon in the back with Liam. Despite all his talk of work, Vin seems to be constantly off, telling Calista about all the things he could fix in the shop and telling me about the pros he just surfed with or his eight-year-old son’s motor cross competition in Las Vegas—a topic never far from Calista and Vin’s lips.

“I swear Calista, I’m a changed man since I got back from the desert,” Vin says, lining up the lumber. “I’m ready to settle down. Build a little nest.”

Calista dresses mannequins like life-sized dolls, telling them what looks cute or what would help conceal their absence of a head.

“You should take a trip like that yourself,” Vin says. “Just get away. Mellow out.”

“My idea of relaxing is not sleeping with twenty-year-old strangers,” Calista mutters, turning a mannequin’s blank face toward her, then away, considering how this affects the feng shui.

“See boys,” Vin says, arranging the pre-cut pieces on the rug. “You know you’ve found the girl you’re going to marry when she doesn’t put up with your shit.”

“I think I’ve found that girl,” Orlando says, grinning.

“That right,” Vin says, returning to his truck for a circular saw and an extension cord.

I’ve listened to Vin’s lectures enough to know he’s never actually talking to anyone but himself.

“He’s driving me nuts,” Calista says, watching Vin drape an extension cord over his shoulder like climbing rope.

“Orlando,” I say. “Why don’t we hike those trails today?”

“Those trails are gnarly brah,” he says, gravitating to Vin’s construction site. “We’ll definitely go. Definitely. Tomorrow. The waves are too cherry today for hiking.”

I don’t particularly want to go anywhere with Orlando or to listen to an hour explanation regarding the Zen of paddling out on a surfboard. I’m just afraid of breaking surfer protocol and being beaten by locals who speak about waves the way mainlanders talk about sex.

Vin’s saw takes out a rack of bathing suits as he swaggers through the shop.

“Watch it!” Calista says. “You’re messing up everything?”

“You have to break a few eggs,” Vin says. “Anything for my baby.”

Calista collects the fallen articles and examining each for grease stains.

“You really want to do something for me?” she asks.

“You know I do, babe.”

“Then get the hell out of here. Go take Sal surfing or something.”

Vin and Orlando study the unassembled bed frame. Out of all the favors Vin would perform for Calista, taking a beginner surfing is too much, unless of course the beginner is someone like long-legged Naomi, who he did teach.

“I’ve been surfing before,” I say. “I just need a dinged up board and someone to point me toward easy swells.”

“You should really go with someone experienced like Vin,” Calista says.

“Naw,” Vin says, pulling the trigger of his circular saw then thumbing the blade when it doesn’t start. “Hit Rubber Ducky. Perfect for beginners.”

“Rubber Ducky? Are there rocks?”

“Lesson one: don’t surf into rocks.” He demonstrates his balance by surfing on a teetering length of lumbar. “It’s just up the road.”

“How far?”

“Not far.”

“Can’t miss it,” Orlando says.

Coming from Texas, I have yet to adjust to islanders’ limited sense of distance. Here, every fifty feet of shoreline has a different name, sometimes more than one, which are absent from all maps and beach park signs. The names of surf spots constitute a locals’ language.

“I really think you should go with him,” Calista says.

“He’s good. He can even use Mel’s board,” Vin says, taking down a seven foot board, neither old nor damaged, which is covering an electrical outlet Vin needs for his power tools. “That Kiwi has been storing this here for months, cluttering up my baby’s shop. Probably doesn’t even remember it’s here.”

Mel is something of the local shaman of surf. He divides his years between the North Shore and New Zealand, following seasonal swells. For days on end he disappears in his van, leaving his daughter Naomi to find her own bed while he camps at surf spots until the waves subside. Then he bums around the shop picking up work with people like Vin. His body is a testament to the fact that he spends more time battling swells each day than most people spend paddling through paperwork.

“Take it,” Vin says. “You won’t bust it at Rubber Ducky.”

I balance the board upright.

“It doesn’t have a leash.”

“Leashes are for pussies,” Orlando says.

* * *

Waves bombard the under-bite of barrier rocks that protects the coastline. The road’s shoulder degrades into a slope of lava rocks tumbling into Waimea Bay. The beach opens like an amphitheater for sunbathers taking in the guttural symphony of gold leaf waves shattering on the rocks. Five surfers bob in the water, beyond the litany of breakers rolling in at an angle, rushing over themselves to scrub the water clean over rocks a few stories below the road.

From the beach the waves look as tall as my board, but manageable, not like the barreling tubes at Pipeline steamrolling the reefs just below the surface. The giant waves come in thirty second intervals, and break into clean rolling sweeps that are scrambled on the rocks. I improvise a leash with both of my shoelaces knotted around my ankle, then paddle out in the calmer waters of the bay.

Straddling my board, I bob on the backend of waves. Each pulls me closer to the breaks. One-by-one, the others paddle out ahead of waves, then disappear from view for thirty seconds, finally popping out to the right, into the calm bay. The water rises and falls under me, as though I'm riding the wake of breaching whales. My confidence becomes as fluid as the setting. A surfer yells to me. His meaning is consumed in the wave mounting behind me. I can turn, paddle into the rising water and rock over the coming crest, or I can do what I do. I paddle toward shore until I'm sucked back and lifted onto the crest, with a front row view of the water dropping away, sliding into an incline growing ever steeper. I stop paddling. The wave rolls out from under me. I lie on my board reconsidering the hundred yards of water separating me from shore. The next rolling hill rises, blotting out the sun. There's no paddling out or turning and paddling over. I have to ride it out.

Fearing the wave will break on my head, I don't start paddling until I'm sucked back into its widening jaws. The water lifts me with no intention of stopping. Sea spray shatters my senses with the force of a fire hose. The board tilts forward and I pop upright. The wave becomes a vertical ramp that I'm riding down. The water rumbles and roars and vibrates through the board. For a moment, I feel invincible, like I'm riding the hood

of a liquid eighteen wheeler. But then the board's nose catches in the advancing water, catapulting face first into the wash.

Saltwater jams my senses, muting perceptions. Hissing momentum rockets me forward. End over end. Turbulence ripples through me. My internal compass spins. I curl into the fetal pose learned in grammar school disaster drills. I'm forced down into the deep, dark nothing. Life doesn't flash before my eyes. My life is a flashing before the eyes—a blink. The tug of shoelaces cracks my tightly curled shell. Will the leash hold? Do I want it to hold? Can nylon slice through a joint? The strings snap, releasing the board and me, to fend for ourselves. For the first time in my life I approach the meaning of helplessness.

The rumble fades into white noise. I swim up and slurp a breath just before the following wave unloads on my head. I hurdle through the dark. Rocks. Where are the rocks? Blood swells to my nose and mouth, anticipating the impending explosion of flesh against stone. I imagine the muted snap of my spine and my ridged body going limp. I have time, time enough to envision Anezka electronically surfing through Hawaiian headlines, thinking that this amateur idiot who got himself killed in a surfing accident sounds a lot like her idiot.

When the momentum passes, I fight the need for breath, and swim sideways beneath the water. I pop up for air, then dive again, chased by the next wave. I swim sideways, counting seconds, refusing to surface before forty. Gulping air, I dare to open my eyes. Fifty yards away, tourists stand with hands to their brows. A lifeguard poses with his giant yellow surf board, deciding if I need rescuing. I start to wave, but catch

myself. A wave in water doesn't mean the same thing that it does on land. I swim face down in an attempt to look proficient despite my dizzy, limp limbs. I can't afford whatever price Hawaii charges for being salvaged.

A local net fisherman with wavy gray hair scuttles down the slope of rocks like a crab, negotiating slippery surfaces, intuitively timing the blasts, then hops back up the incline with my board. On land, I jog toward him past my audience of awestruck tourists. The shoe strings drag in the sand behind me, the frayed ends collecting detritus. The knot is synched so tight my left foot is becoming purple, but I keep running.

"Those waves are for pros bro," the lifeguard yells. "I know all the pros here and you ain't one."

Still coughing up sea froth and pouring saltwater snot, I bow to the board, which is laid out like a drown victim awaiting identification. The nose is snapped, the fins are missing, and several long tears along the Plexiglas surface give the impression of a shark attack.

"No leash?" the fisherman mutters.

I shake my head.

"Who surfs Waimea without a leash?"

"I thought it was Rubber Ducky."

"Rubber Ducky?"

"I mean, it didn't seem so bad from the shore," I say, lifting the board, making sure nothing else falls off.

"Isn't this Mel's board?"

“I’m borrowing it.”

“You’re borrowing Mel’s board?”

My jaw trembles and teeth chatter as I jog down the road, trying to conceal the damage from passing cars. It would have been nice to be pummeled on the rocks or to have at least received a few cracked ribs. Then no one could say fool to my face, and Mel wouldn’t be as compelled to teach me a lesson.

The bumper stickers “Eddie Would Go” and “Eddie Would Tow,” read like rhymed couplets and endless mantras pasted on the rusted bumpers of foreign trucks and two-tone SUVs, which serve as portable surfboard racks. On the North Shore, Eddie Aikau has more signage than Jesus, who stands at the foot of the church overlooking Waimea, his hands raised in supplication as if to say, “I don’t know brah.” Eddie is to surfers what Bob Marley is to Rastafarians. He’s the surfing messiah, grinning as he walks through the valley of the shadow of water. Like all spiritual icons, he died for his way of life, as a testament that there’s truth in the next swell rising behind you.

Eddie was a high school dropout working at the Dole cannery to finance his surfing lifestyle when he burst on the national scene, dominating a big wave competition at Waimea. *Life* magazine’s photos of the event made him an instant icon. His reputation was cemented when he petitioned the city council to appoint him the first paid lifeguard for the entire North Shore. His myth grew from his insistence on paddling out in greater than twenty foot swells to save overconfident surfers and white tourists like me, who he hated. According to his legend, not a single life was lost while he was on duty and the number of his saves remains unknown. In accordance with his beachside lifestyle, he

didn't bother filling out incident reports. To connect with his roots, Eddie volunteered to help crew a double-hulled canoe over the 2,400 mile Polynesian migration passage between Hawaii and Tahiti. The vessel sprung a leak not twelve miles off shore, forcing the passengers to cling to the capsized vessel through the night as they were pounded by trade wind waves. In the morning, Eddie insisted on paddling back for help on his surfboard. By chance the crew was rescued hours later, but, despite the largest search and rescue mission in modern Hawaiian history, Eddie remained lost.

What the Polynesian Voyaging Society failed to realize when planning this unassisted journey was that those who originally made this crossing didn't do so by virtue of nautical technology or skill. This leap of faith was the consequence of the most fundamental urge of all life to fill the unknown. Humans came to populate these islands the same way coconut palms did, as the rare survivors of infinite failed attempts—as a nucleus of life clinging to a meteor, hurtling toward a fertile planet. Human's presence on these islands has less to do with fate than with the compulsion that drove boat after boat of pioneers to toss their lot in with the tides for no better reason than a faith in something beyond their own experience. This same restlessness infects me, compels me to ditch the board, grab my pack, and hit the open road. Afoot and lighthearted I'll circle these islands, compelled by the council of old men who survived to whisper through scraggly beards that I must not stop here, that there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell ahead, that I'm counted among those few who will endure the tides and stumble upon some elysian fields just beyond the next rise. Then again, maybe these islanders simply came from a long line of fugitives interested only in escaping their offenses.

Chapter Nine

“And I was going to let you borrow my old leash,” Vin says, laying the board across his saw horses as if preparing to operate with his power tools. “You’re lucky you even got it back. I surfed with a pro there once. His board just vanished.” I flinch each time he pokes the holes in the fiberglass. “Doubt Mel will even mind. Probably just be glad you’re okay. Hell, he’ll be impressed you surfed Waimea.”

Heavy steps climb the porch. We all stare at the door.

“What?” Naomi asks.

“Check out what Mr. Smoothie did to your dad’s board,” Vin says.

Naomi covers her mouth, eyes darting between the board and me.

“Don’t worry about it,” she finally says. “It’s fine. It should be fine.”

* * *

“Hey there, Sal.” Mel leans through the smoothie window. “Looks like you spilled some coffee there mate.”

I scrub the spill from my chest with the smoothie rag. He wouldn’t remember my name if he hadn’t heard about my accident, would he?

Mel slaps Ziploc bags full of cold cuts on the serving board between us. A strip of pink skin defines his broad, crumpled nose. Sun-struck hair storms over the constellation of freckles on his broad back. He removes two Coronas from his cargo shorts and pops both open. News travels as fast as the swells on the islands. He had to have heard about

the board, hadn't he? Perhaps he was being nice so I wouldn't feel bad, or he just didn't care, or maybe this was all a façade.

“Like a beer?”

“No thanks.”

Mel's bloodshot eyes fix on Calista's ass as she arranges a sandal display. I react each time his shoulder muscles shift. He flips a blade from his pocket, slices a lime, squishes the rind in his beer, then sets the knife down between us.

“You hear about the kid who got himself killed at Waimea yesterday?”

“What?”

“Yep. Some kid trying to surf I guess. You didn't hear this?”

“No.”

Was I a ghost story? Was he testing me?

“Yeah. Blood fucking mess I hear.” He drains nearly half the beer. “You surf mate?”

I brace against the counter.

“You ever get wet,” he says through a mouthful of mush. “Or you just make juicies?”

“I was. I was trying to learn.” I study his face. “Yesterday actually.”

“Yeah. How'd it go?”

“Not good.”

“That’ll happen your first few times out, especial in Hawaii. The breaks are unforgiving.” He rips off half his sandwich in one bite. “I’ll have to take you out sometime.”

* * *

“Shoe strings brah!” Jason says, slurping his coffee. “Classic!”

I pretend he’s just taking a midday break from fixing Mel’s board instead of getting coffee to compliment his midmorning high. He had promised to start on the board immediately as a favor to Britney.

“It could have been worse,” I mutter.

“Brah, it couldn’t have been much worse.”

“I mean, I could have ended up on the rocks instead of just the board.”

Jason laughs as he removes the hand rolled cigarette from behind his ear and lights it with a scented candle. My plan is to tell Mel about the accident when the board is repaired. Of course this hinges on Jason actually fixing it.

“Just ran into Mel.” He coughs, exhaling smoke in a fit of laughter.

“Mel?”

“Yeah Mel. Asked what he wanted me to do with the board. Didn’t know what I was talking about. Had to remind him that Vin traded him boards when Vin busted the nose off Mel’s old one. Then how you smashed it on the rocks.”

“What!?”

“Funniest shit I’ve seen in days. The Kiwi’s eyes about popped out. Started ranting, ‘Scrub it mate. Scrub it!’”

My expression is not what Jason expected for his impersonation.

“Means he wants me to fix it,” Jason says. “‘Scrub it’ is like to sand the fiberglass”

“Yeah, I get that.”

* * *

At the end of my shift, I nearly stumble down the stairs when I notice Mel sitting alone on the bottom step. If he’s going to beat me, it’s better he does it here where Britney and Calista could conceivably stop the fight for fear of Mel ruining the feng shui.

“Come here, mate.” He walks into the dirt yard.

I drag my pack behind, my tongue counting my teeth.

“Let’s hear it.”

I tell him the story step-by-step. He stops me to expand or repeat crucial points that highlight my ineptitude in surfing and decision making. I don’t bother bickering over the details of how no one gave me permission to use the board or why I was stupid enough to go alone. Part of him, especially the region around his clinched fists, wants me to disagree.

“Let me ask you this? How would you deal with someone who disrespected your property like that? I mean, how’d you like it if I tossed your pack into Waimea?”

I shake my head.

Vin stands in the door of the shop holding up an unlit joint and yelling for Mel to join him. I stare into Mel’s eyes as he very slowly and precisely calls me a coward. He wants me to react, to be a man and defend my name. I want to. I’ve always preferred the

physical punishment, a mother's slap, as it absolves guilt instantly, and yet I've never been able to consciously volunteer for this punishment. I was born with the gift of being able to avoid physical confrontation, to defuse most any situation by accepting whatever offenses my opponent dresses me in. In all my backpedaling, I had yet to be shoved into action, to be pushed to a breaking point. I have always despised this about myself.

"This ain't over mate."

He pounds up the stairs to accept Vin's joint.

"Fucking Pussy," he says.

I nod.

* * *

On the beach I recheck the contents of my pack. When I'm gone, Mel will still be the only one who remembers my name. He'll drive up on me on some deserted road and cut his van onto the shoulder as he nears. The threat of Mel drunkenly pummeling me some night soon is a good reason to leave, but then, it's also a reason to stay. The hungry wanderers of the Old Testament needed a god who behaved like this, one obsession with vengeance, who trumpeted the laws of an eye for an eye, and sacrifice as amends for one's sins. They wanted to believe that there was a sense of order and balance, that their enemies would be repaid for their trespasses.

I start to run. On the beach, the sand slows my progress. I hop recklessly over the sharp swells of volcanic rocks forming a natural jetty at the edge of Shark's Cove. Crabs scuttle like roaches into cracks. Sea spray dusts my legs and slickens the footholds. My

pack tips me forward then back as I leap tide pools and spillways. A sudden nausea, the vertigo of seeing how far I have yet to fall, collapses me. I spit pink stomach juice into the scalloped rocks then crumple atop my pack until the nausea boils over to a cold sweat. I sit with my head bent to my knees.

Even if a giant wave claimed me from this ledge, I'd be too terrified to swim more than a hundred yards out or to allow the waves to straighten my spine on the rocks. Still, I take comfort in imagining my body at peace with the swells, limbs filleted as I sink. Dog sized sharks will tug at me gently, my eyes half open, gazing into the depths growing darker. I will join the countless bodies that wash ashore in Hawaii each year, the tourists and Chinese fishermen defaced by the sea. Most young suicides have a demented faith that there's something greater than life after death. I'm merely tired, and not so young anymore. I feel like an Alzheimer's patient, a punch drunk fighter, whose memories have been peeled back, leaving only fragmented scraps of my childhood with which to interpret my current circumstances. I'm an indigent, wanting only a soft warm bed, and someone to watch over me.

I'm unfit for rash decisions, for the impulsiveness of passionate men. Once, after leaving Anezka for the week, I stood barefoot on the bathroom tile of my garage apartment, naked in the glow of the bulbs bubbling out above the vanity, studying the knife she gave me our first Christmas together. It was a present for this trip. I folded the bath rug and put it atop the toilet. I tested the blade on the crease of my forearm, but this was nothing like laying the blade flat and ripping concentric lines with the tip. It felt

sickly, exactly like anesthesia freezing the veins. I woke on the tile, the blade in my crumpled grip. A burst of nausea brought me to my knees.

This is the story of a coward sitting at the world's edge, with paradise to his back, afraid to get wet. This is no revelation. I have long known my limitations; this is just the first time I am forced to confront them.

The postcard of a volcanic spout spewing lava jerks in the wind, wanting to escape my grip. I write a confession which I know I'll never send. It's all a game, and I can't stop playing.

This is the story of a liar.

I sling the card over the edge to drift limply on the surface and disseminate.

On a fresh postcard I fill the space with cryptic Bible quotes that will make you laugh:

“The land shall yield her fruit, and ye shall eat your fill, and dwell therein in safety” (Leviticus 25:19).

Chapter Ten

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

The days blend into mush. I arrive at the shop at seven to do push-ups, read, and wait for someone like Sean to trigger the shop's security system by jerking on the door in search of Britney. The alarm wails through the neighborhood like an air raid drill until Calista drives over from Vin's, or Britney runs out of Jason's house restraining her braless chest in one hand. The security service charges fifty bucks each time this happens. Calista starts leaving her Rottweiler tied up on the porch instead of arming the system. One of my morning duties has become coaxing the dog out from hiding, untangling his extra long leash, and cleaning the toppled pots.

The days accumulate like the translucent rice paper pages of the Old Testament, repeating stories, directions, lists of lists, and vague prophecies. I imagine an old Moses, sitting alone in a shepherd's tent, reinventing the particulars of his deposed royalty, claiming he was a Hebrew all along with a mysterious birth, describing how he led the slaves into the desert for freedom instead of a need to resurrect his injured pride.

Mornings I'm left alone for hours to clean the dried smoothie spills and to drain the stray beers left from impromptu parties that form when beach bonfires simmer out. I find a note taped to the half filled blender, proclaiming, "Duties for All Naughty Nectar Employees."

Flies colonize the passion fruit. The freezer is a waiting tomb, offering a few cubes of crystallized cantaloupe and loose berries skating across the bottom. The expensive ingredients, like organic acai berries and raspberries, are the first to go. Britney has yet to figure out how to order wholesale or to buy from any number of local organic growers who sell their excess in unattended roadside stands. I'm an alchemist, turning absence into substance, substituting grapefruit juice for orange juice, and watered-down whole milk for skim.

The only person concerned with Naughty Nectar's success is a regular named Victoria. She's said to be an heiress to a major hotel chain and owns the largest house on Sunset beach. She inherently understands business, even if her only career seems to have been hiring OJ Simpson's lawyers to sue the LAPD for unlawfully destroying one of her eye sockets when she refused to lie on the ground in a suede suit. She's feisty and genuinely angry that these young, beautiful women are wasting career opportunities with ephemeral lovers.

"Calista just needs to fuck someone else," Victoria says after I tell her I have none of the ingredients to make any of the drinks she requests. "That's the only way to get over anyone."

"Should I try to seduce Calista?"

Victoria stares at me from behind huge sunglasses that conceal the LAPD's work. Victoria's the first person to remember Anezka's name.

"What the fuck you doing in Hawaii if you have a girl at home?"

I smile. Victoria's a mature version of Anezka. While she's had something of a charmed life, she has few illusions that clog her reasoning. I explain that I must flirt with infidelity and loss, insecurity and jealousy, to understand what it means to love or to be happy.

"You're a fucking idiot," she says and leaves for Starbucks.

Calista's customers are turned away. I'm not allowed to touch her register. When she does come in, Calista reminds me how much Britney owes her. Bill collectors call. The landlord leaves cryptic notes written in the same mood as the letters he writes to newspapers regarding Hawaiian sovereignty: "...This willing path of self destruction is no way to establish your business as an independent venture, free from the voices and constraints of demanding creditors." A stuttering bicycle mechanic claims Britney owes him five bucks for fixing one of her flat tires. They all want free smoothies.

"What's the secret," they ask me. "I can't make smoothies like this at home."

"It's not what's in them," I say. "It's what's not in them."

I prefer the mornings. I'm left alone with the dog to clean the night's wreckage. While I can get along with most anyone, and absolutely need to be around people, I'm discovering that I genuinely hate most everyone, though mostly because they seem to be living carefree lives with few consequences. Vin's ex-wife comes in looking like an older version of Calista. She tells Calista to take Vin back, that he loves her and so does his son. Calista tells Britney that Liam's father just got killed off from his steady acting gig. Britney confides in Calista that Sean's father is getting out of prison. Maria bitches about how Britney's sleeping on her futon with Jason, and not straightening up after herself.

Britney complains about how Naomi took her bed sheets to sleep on the beach with Orlando.

Naomi complains of a tourist professor who asked what she's doing in Hawaii besides surfing. Calista and Orlando assure her she doesn't need those negative vibes. The North Shore is a drifters' support group. I wish I could be like them, finding Zen in a filthy van and credit card debt.

I am a teenager again, sitting inside, waiting for the phone to ring. I've become the North Shore's answering service. I'm an interpreter, analyzing the tone and urgency of callers. I'm the priest, listening to stories of love and loss which I'm sworn not to repeat. I hear stories about surfing, about how many lives Waimea Bay claims each year. I hear about a friend who's in the ICU after a surfing accident, or how a highway man was knocked out of his shoes when a car careened off the road. Naomi tells me how she just snapped a dude's board but he doesn't mind. Jason greets me with complicated handshakes I can't reciprocate and promises that tomorrow he'll start on Mel's board. Tomorrow Orlando will take me surfing, hiking, and snorkeling. Tomorrow Vin will hire me to trim trees.

A beach bum leans on the smoothie bar and delivers a narrative of how he has lived out of his station wagon for the past five years, collecting welfare and disability checks from a minor construction accident, but these checks just ended. Gray hair pours from his crown of baldness and white chest hair covers fried skin and a shark tooth on a gold chain.

"I'm free," he says.

“Okay.”

“Free but hungry.”

“Yeah.”

He lifts his elbows from the counter. I wipe down the counter again. He first came here in the navy but dropped out after a year to grow pot. Made nearly a million but blew it all on cocaine. Now he goes to meetings.

“Paradise, right?” he says.

“It ain’t cheap,” I say.

Paradise is a compromise. Either you’re born here and made to watch tourists spoil your inheritance, or you must sacrifice your mainland ties, and not just your personal connections, to remain. So what have I sacrificed? Is my wandering across these islands of simmering lava rocks like a tribal youth walking across coals, an act that proves nothing except that we must come to appreciate and endure these useless, painful, rituals?

The phone rings and a long pause waits for me on the other end. I’ve become a connoisseur of electrified distance crackling over the wire.

“Do you know where I left my strapless black dress?”

“In your closet, under the laundry basket.”

“Why would I put it there?”

“You wanted to remember that it was dirty, but that you had to dry clean it.”

Her closet door slides in the tracks and slams against the frame. The plastic laundry bin smacks the dry wall.

“Well.”

“Well.”

* * *

After school, or on days their mothers wake too late to take them, Sean and Liam run around the shop like it's a daycare lacking attendants. A fluctuating gang of eight-year-old boys bored with parents who just want to sit in the shop and talk for hours, play like a pack of dogs set free in a dog park. Every customer comments on the beauty and innocence of these boys when they are a considerable distance away. The boys could be child models for surf brands. Liam is a spoiled cherub with locks of dirty blonde hair puffing in every which way. Sean looks almost native with straight black hair, leather ankle bracelets, and a perpetual swimsuit. Both live the kind of free childhoods I dreamed of as a boy, but for them the Hawaiian wilderness is not enough. They perpetually beg for video games, toys, and candy. I want to tell them to open their eyes, that they have everything they could possibly want, to learn to be satisfied with what they have—the same things my mother told me.

The boys yell as loud as the adults, use their toys as weapons, then run crying to their mothers. Liam snaps the head off one of his action figures so Sean can't play with it. Sean throws away a chunk of ice-cream so Liam can't eat it. They put more effort into getting me to answer homework questions than it would take to complete assignments themselves. As a boy, these were the children I hated, the kids who cheated off me and made better grades, or who made the girls like them by calling the girls ugly names. When Liam and Sean do answer a question correctly, they expect me to pay them. If they

forget their homework, they beg. When they do scrounge enough money, they run to Foodland and return with beards of ice cream sandwiches. Jesus saw beauty and innocence in children. I see miniature thieves, liars, and cheats. I see myself, a selfish being stripped of any pretense of morality, spirituality, or intelligence.

I catch Sean and Liam on the stool behind Calista's register. In explanation, Liam points to the screen saver on Calista's computer, which features palm trees tilted over blonde sand and see-through water. "Paradise," he says. Beauty must be captured, converted to binomials, flattened on a screen, and photo-shopped before modern eyes can understand it. Paradise is the unreal, but then it has always been this way.

* * *

Britney becomes increasingly disillusioned every time she harvests cash from the register. She assigns me busy work then stands with a cigarette dangling from her lips, watching me repaint the imperfections of a cramped Naughty Nectar sign. I finish before she thinks up more tasks. I'm sent for supplies from Foodland with the promise that she'll repay me when I return, but she's never there when I get back.

I smile each time Sean cries because he doesn't want the leftovers from Britney's meals with Jason. Calista has also started giving me whatever food she doesn't want, or which is overloading the shop's mini refrigerator.

"He's a garbage disposal," Britney says, watching me shovel down congealed pasta.

Sometimes Britney returns with generic Foodland versions of the organic fruit advertised on the menu. But mostly she just tells me to go light on whatever fruit we're

out of. Often she returns around two to tell me that she needs me to cover for her so she can get a henna tattoo or go to Haleiwa. When she does replace me, she makes no apologies for being late, only stares into the register. In explanation, I list the supplies I purchased from Foodland. She stops offering me the money in the tip jar. Instead, she gives me trinkets like an evil eye, which I am to hang in my house to ward off evil, roving spirits.

* * *

Mel enters wearing Calista's old pajama pants bulging around his stocky calves. Sweat and paint speckle his skin and pants from retouching one of Mocean's signs.

"How's the board coming mate," Mel asks when Calista steps outside.

"I thought Jason spoke to you?" I ask. "He told me that you didn't want the board because it was too long to do any real surfing."

"Because you fucked it up so bad it's worthless."

It's conceivable that Jason fed me a lie to put off fixing the board, but I doubt he would go to that much effort.

"Someone called and said they had a job for you," I tell Mel. "Said she was your wife."

"Which one?"

I shrug. "If you're looking for work you can have my job. Britney's looking for a replacement."

"Why, because you're as good at making drinks as you are at surfing?"

I smile and nod like a tourist who doesn't speak the language. "You're right, Mel."

* * *

"Why don't you use Sal?" Calista asks each time Vin pops in, searching for Mel to do some tree trimming.

I suspect she just wants me out of the shop, that she thinks anyone who would continue working for Britney for free must be desperate enough to steal. I wish I could blame my cynicism on my situation, but it's an inherent defect.

"You know anything about landscaping?" Vin asks. "Clearing brush?"

"That's about all I do know."

"Tomorrow," he says, though we both know I'll be stuck waiting for Britney well after he leaves for work. "Never base your life around a woman," he tells me when Calista walks outside. "You'll be waiting your balls off."

Orlando went snorkeling for the first time a few days before and now wants to get his snorkel guide license. He wants to take me out. Tomorrow.

But tomorrow the surf is too epic to stay on land. Serious surfers are masters of living in the moment, willing to drop everything to ride waves. You can tell how genuine a surfer is by how many jobs he's lost from skipping work when the surf is up. Some, like Vin and Jason, start their own businesses as a means of working around the big waves. But the pure surf disciples are those who give up everything to follow swells, men like Mel who live in a constant state of flux, working menial jobs when the surf is bad, and forsaking land for water when the waves are right.

I sympathize with Ulysses, stuck on the island of the Lotus-eaters where his men were full and satisfied and quickly void of any ambition or thoughts of home. Life was easy, with plenty of shade and fruit. And yet, this one man forced the entire crew to leave, to brave the unknown, to perish, just so he could return to a home where the only thing of which he could be certain, was that nothing remained as he had left it.

* * *

Afternoons I walk along the road hoping someone will recognize me from the shop. I envision rental cars full of bikini clad girls in need of directions. I wait on the rusted frame of a car that serves as a pot for immature jungle plants: a monument to the way of all human achievements. I wait at benches, waving buses past.

I sneak through the jungle around Waimea Falls' ticket booth, hopping on slick black stones in the creek until I arrive at a network of paved trails ambling past labeled plants, benches, concession stands, vending machines, and restrooms. The falls has been cleaned of excess growth and the pool is crowded with sightseers like me searching for some pristine and secluded fountain. The mountain towers behind, an unexcavated pyramid, offering sanctuary, a challenge, and distance.

I walk up back roads searching for a trail that will lead to the Koolau summit ridge, but I only find dead ends. I don't even consider finding my own way up. Surely, in old age, I'll look back on my choices between equally worn paths around such obstacles and like the elderly Robert Frost, I'll tell myself that I took the one less traveled. This is the measure of American optimism, not that you necessarily choose the unexplored path,

as all paths have necessarily been taken, but that you march ahead believing that there is no other way.

Chapter Eleven

The rain clears the North Shore of tourists. Britney sends me home, explaining how she wants to have a rainy night inside, picnicking on her bed and watching old movies. I make the mistake of assuming she's describing a situation with me. I run back to her place through the rain, chasing hens and their last remaining chicks between alleys and brush. In the apartment, Sean stares at me. I'm the teenaged babysitter with nothing better to do on a weekend night.

Someone pounds on the door. I freeze. Sean takes cover in the bedroom. The pounding returns. This visitor must have been waiting for me.

The knocker is not Britney wanting to get out of wet clothes, nor Mel's fist punching through my skull. Instead, a man hides behind the stem of his golf course umbrella and enormous glasses.

"You something to Britney?" he asks.

"Excuse me?"

"You something to Britney?"

"Her cousin, Sal, if that's what you mean."

"Cousin you say?"

We both know it would take too much effort to prove me wrong. His unsteady eyes collect what they can of the cluttered apartment around my feet.

“Well Sal, you tell Britney this ain’t no flop house, whore motel. People come in and out of here at all hours and they can’t all be cousins, you hear? You tell her that.”

I nod. He remains, lips moving without words. This isn’t going as well as he rehearsed. I was supposed to argue so he could call the authorities and have a documented reason to kick Britney out. My psychic powers foresee an eviction notice taped to Britney’s door.

“You tell Britney she needs to tell my wife the next time she’s expecting long term guests.”

“Okay.”

“How long you staying anyhow?”

“Not long.”

“Good.”

I lock the door then sit on the bed beside Sean. He’s lying belly down in front of a burial mound of toys: mutants with powers instead of deformities, superheroes in tights, kung fu animals, soldiers with weapons bigger than their bodies—all characters from my youth, though amplified with toy soldier steroids. With these soldiers taking cover in the wads of bras and panties decorating the floor, this apartment is a mix between Anezka’s place and the childhood room I shared with my brother. Sean collides toys in imitation of love and hate as his face is colored by the blue glow of a movie: *The Beach*. I get progressively drunk on jug wine left from the previous night’s bonfire.

Sean reenacts elaborate scenes with his action figures, blending characters and plots from the pile of movies beside the TV stand. From what I gather, an evil plastic

man is trying to blow up the island of the bed. The bad guy captures my leg, then is left on my knee for me to control while Sean concentrates on the hero. His narrative voice takes on the croak of the possessed child in *The Shining*—a voice he uses when playing alone. As a child, adults always thought I had such a vivid imagination. They thought I actually believed I was a superhero or had invisible friends, or that I came up with the movie quotes I spouted on repeat. As children we are forced to role play, to be actors and directors practicing for the heroic roles of adulthood.

When I sit to read, Sean tries to join in. He doesn't read books; he writes them.

"See, this dude goes over here," he says, explaining the hieroglyphics on his homemade flip book. "And then something bad happens there...and then...and then."

I envy his imagination until I realize these books are versions of Mario Brothers stages. The final scene, which generally comes less than halfway through the stapled booklets, contains the only legible phrase in the entire story: The End.

"So you want to buy it?" he asks.

"Buy it?"

"My mom buys my books."

"For how much?"

"Ten dollars."

"No."

He throws his book into the pile of toys. I throw off my shoes. He picks up a toy slot machine and pulls the lever endlessly like a lab rat. No matter what combination of money signs or fruit turn up, in his *Shining* voice he says, "That's a keeper."

With each hour, Sean checks the fridge with more frequency, moving aside nearly empty condiments and alcohol.

“If you go to sleep, your mom will get home quicker,” I say. “And she’ll probably have food.”

“No she won’t,” he says, as if I’ve just claimed Santa is coming.

* * *

The next day Sean is awake when I return from my morning run to shower. He sits on the couch with his backpack on, clutching the shoulder straps. Britney won’t let him catch the bus. She insists on driving him. He stoops forward to conceal tear tracks on dirty cheeks.

“You know where my mom is?”

“She should be home soon,” I say, then leave.

* * *

Stoned philosophy and right-ons seep through the window where Sean, Britney, Naomi, and Orlando share a pasta pot luck. There aren’t enough bowls so I volunteer to wait. Warm with drink, I close my eyes and focus on the distant push of waves buffeting the night.

Orlando and Naomi leave with a sleeping bag for the beach and Sean is sent to bed for refusing to eat. I finish what he doesn’t. Britney checks the time then puts on a movie about con artists that was filmed on the North Shore. She names the locations of each scene and provides anecdotes of the various stars she met. Apparently Calista is best friends with the lead love interest, who is also an ex-model. Calista has plenty of stories

about celebrities, as her old shop was in Malibu and Liam's father played Superboy on a TV series. Britney grew up a few doors down from the Sublime house in Long Beach, dated the lead singer's best friend, partied with Gwen Stefani, and was there when the group found out the lead singer overdosed on the eve of the release of their breakthrough album.

"You know anyone famous?" she asks.

"My brother once waited on Sandra Bullock," I say. "I was voted most likely to be famous in High School. So maybe you'll get to say you knew me one day."

"What will you be famous for?"

I stare at the screen. "Serial killing," I say, "But not like gruesome attacks, like I'll only kill assholes from far enough away that I won't get blood on me."

"Well you better not kill me," Britney says, leaning on my shoulder.

In these moments, when all other concerns have been put to sleep, her sweetness surfaces.

The movie finishes and Britney checks the time. It's late, but not late enough. She smokes as I flip through Naomi's European travel guide. In the corner of her eye I see her watching me over her cigarette. When I laugh, she leans into me, wanting to see what is so funny. I point to a highlighted description of Amsterdam's red light district.

"I used to be a dancer you know," Britney says.

"Like a drill team dancer?"

"Like, a dancer, dancer," she shakes her chest. "I used to strip."

My eyes explore the topography of her body, processing this revision. Her posture tightens to aid my imagination. She demonstrates a few moves while kneeling above me on the couch. I recline. She folds her tank top over her chest.

“I’d put some bills in your g-string,” I say, “if I had some.”

“I’d let you,” she says, “if I had on a g-string.”

She lowers the rim of her jeans to the white skin serving as a negative of her bikini bottoms. I empty the wine, set the jug down, then fall sideways on the couch.

“You aren’t tired,” she says, following me down, resting her head on my chest.

“You need a massage?”

I shake my head, yawning and blinking and rolling on my stomach.

She crouches next to me, her face resting on the pillow, inches from mine, whispering, “Sal. Sal.”

I take a long, slow breath and let it go.

“Mom,” Sean calls.

After a long pause, Britney’s weight leaves the pillow. The door opens and closes.

Sean hides half behind the sarong that serves as the bedroom door.

“Is she coming back?”

I shake my head.

“Are you going to leave too?”

“Not tonight.”

* * *

Sean kneels on my stool behind the register, harvesting quarters from my tip jar.

“How much did you take?” I ask.

He stares at me. Then, looking down, he holds his hand out, dropping a quarter in my palm like a communion wafer. Forcing him to apologize would only make him feel justified in stealing from me. I throw the quarter back at him and return to sweeping the porch. I must actively remind myself that this offense is nothing compared to what I did to Mel’s board.

Calista drags in a crying Liam. She hands the boys a dollar and they dart out to buy ice-cream sandwiches.

“I caught Sean stealing from my tip jar,” I say. “And I know they both know how to open the registers.”

“It’s fine,” Calista says, waving me off as she steps onto the porch with the phone and a ready cigarette.

She calls Britney. Sean and Liam got caught ordering a six-year-old girl to strip naked. They paid her a dollar not to tell.

Innocence is not a virtue of children, but of naïve adults. It’s a belief born with one’s children, a flood of hormones that convinces us that these wads of human putty can be molded into perfection. Innocence is lost in parents, when they realize their children are just as flawed as themselves.

* * *

I wash my socks and swimsuit beneath the shower. Strings of red dirt spiral around my forearm. I spread these articles on the backs of chairs to dry and scatter the remaining contents of my pack on the couch before repacking them. One liter jug I fill

with water and the other with jug wine. The door crashes open. Sean is crying. He has pissed his swimsuit. Britney needs me to fill in for her at the shop.

I stuff my pack in a hurry.

“You can leave that here,” she says, stripping the trunks from Sean’s tiny legs. I suspect she wants to check my pack for stolen money stained with smoothie syrup, or to read what I wrote about her on postcards.

“First rule of traveling is that you never leave your pack when you can take it with you.”

“Since when are you traveling?” she asks, pulling off Sean’s shirt and shoving him naked toward the bathroom.

I shrug, but she has already lost interest. Mother and son disappear in the bathroom. The shower hisses on and Sean screams.

“I’m leaving,” I say, with my pack strapped on.

Britney yells at Sean to stop yelling. I want to say that I won’t be back, but I doubt she would care. I don’t want to be exiled from this side of the island, the warm showers, the freedom to lounge in Mocean, the smoothies, the people, and the bonfires—but part of me thinks I need this, to disappear with no warning. In reality I just know myself, that if I tell her I’m leaving she’ll ask me to stay and I won’t be able to say no. Or maybe I’m scared she wouldn’t say anything.

Chapter Twelve

The remaining passion fruits have deflated and seeped ooze. Pennies and pens rattle in the register and tip jar. Half-eaten, late night food and lumpy fruit cocktails clog the sink. Fruit flies have colonized the trash. I clean the entire smoothie bar, which is easier now that there is little left. Then I eat a few of the baked goods from the unsold organic breads and muffins collecting mold beneath plastic wrap. I chase the sticky cake with the last of leftover beer.

A country song comes on. Naomi laughs and says she has always wanted to learn to two-step. I pull her close, and show her the few moves I know, maneuvering her through the racks of clothes standing like frozen dancers

“I’ve never seen you like this,” Calista says from behind the register. “Something is different about you? Are you high?”

“I’m full.”

Calista straps a coconut bead bracelet on my wrist. My arm hairs jump to the sensation of her fingers tracing the fortune in the veins spiraling around my forearms.

“That looks hot,” she says.

I hand the bracelet back but she stops me. “Wear it. Model it for the afternoon.”

I should be drunk more often. No, I just need to relax, and be the person who emerges when I’m drunk, someone who sees the potential in possibilities instead of all

that can go wrong—a person for who, the only line he remembers from the Old Testament is, “let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die” (Isaiah 22:13).

* * *

The sky darkens with storm clouds thirty minutes before closing. The effects of alcohol and food fade. My teeth chatter as my gaze drifts out the window. Rain bounces off the road like hail.

When Naomi and Calista go outside to smoke, I call Anezka from the empty smoothie booth to tell her I’m done.

“Guess what I’m wearing,” she says.

“Why?”

“I’m wearing the pajama pants and hoody you left. They smell like you.”

Whatever I planned to say dissolves into a warm mush. “Love doesn’t make sense without you,” I say.

She hesitates. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Neither do I, but it sounds nice.”

“It sounds like you’re twelve.”

I had hoped that hunger, loneliness, and fear would raise poetry from me. Instead, I repeat nonsensical versions of movie dialogue—phrases that would only make sense in pop songs drowned in synthetic beats.

“I’m leaving,” I say.

“You’re coming home? Why?”

I consider this. “Not yet,” I say.

“Then why are you telling me?”

* * *

Calista flinches when I meet her walking back inside. I hold the coconut bead bracelet out to her.

“Why do you have that?”

“You gave it to me to wear,” I say.

“Did I?” She takes the loose bracelet and tosses it to the glass case. It hits and slide off.

“I’m a lot of things, but I’m not a thief,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, digging through her purse.

“Goodbye, Calista.”

“Okay.”

Naomi joins me along the road to Britney’s.

“You staying with Orlando on the beach tonight?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I don’t care where he sleeps.”

“Well tell him he can have my couch.”

“Why? What are you doing?”

Before I can think of an elliptical answer she breaks off toward Britney’s and waves over her shoulder.

It’s impossible to be forgotten when you were never known. If anything, I’ll be the scapegoat for all that is missing, an empty register and vacant freezer. Sean and Liam

will learn my name as the perpetrator, the patron saint of all things lost, missing, broken,
or unknown.

Chapter Thirteen

The dull concussion of a coconut pounds the ground. I palm the skull-sized shell sloshing with milk and pull it to my side for breakfast. The palm fronds saw into the steel wool clouds. More people die each year from being struck by coconuts than lightning. Still, the tree is stationary, a fixed point to curl around, a shelter from the groundskeepers and security guards roving the park on mowers and golf carts. Ants transfer from the coconut to me. In the tree the ripening coconuts clank like bamboo wind-chimes. A wash of rain sweeps in. Drops fall like meteor dust lit by moonlight. They accumulate on my face and drip down like a line of carpenter ants. The maddening aubade of birds trumpets the invisible radiance of the coming day. Five in the morning is a good time to hit the road, to beat the authorities looking to sweep the park before tourists wake up. But I'm not ready to face the decision of what to do with another day. I close my eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

Tires crunch over cropped grass and an engine rattles like a steam top. A floodlight freezes me in place.

“Hey brah!” a voice yells.

“Me?”

“Who the fuck else you think I’m talking to?” asks a voice from behind the light mounted on the driver’s side of the patrol car. “Come here?”

The uneven field stretches out before me to the road, hotels, and the mountains beyond. The cruiser pushes forward to block my escape. I envision the first few steps, sprinting over the open field before the sirens flip, my shadow swimming across grass colored in funhouse reds and blues. Over a fence, I’d make the chase a footrace, sprinting through hotel suits with topless guests, leaping between balconies, throwing metal trash cans in the street, and knocking down old men carrying surfboards, until I’m cornered on a cliff with the sunlight coloring the water bursting on the rocks like confetti.

“We have you surrounded,” will say the megaphone voice. “You’re out of choices.”

“You always have a choice,” I’ll say before diving over the edge. When my body doesn’t rise from the whitewash, the cop will run back to his cruiser and speed away. As the camera fixes on the water, in the corner of the frame my hand will rise over the cliff’s edge, feeling for a handhold.

“You deaf brah?” the cop snaps. “Come here.”

My tongue counts my teeth. I knew I should have slept with a mouth guard. Fear of fractured teeth had kept me out of confrontations my entire life. I approach the light, biting my lips and hoping for a baton’s impact on a less prominent portion of my skull, something that will blacken my eyes and give me Marlon Brando’s crumpled nose.

“What’s up?” I ask, more confident than intended.

“You’re getting a ticket for illegal camping is what.”

The driver is a Hawaiian with a tilted cap, a tight black shirt and a badge dangling from his neck like a gaudy medallion.

“ID,” he commands.

“I don’t have one.” I’m almost impressed by my lie.

“How old are you?”

I lean on the car, glancing between the officer and the street.

“I’m talking to you brah!”

I grip the rim of the car window.

“17.”

“17?”

“18.” I had already broken Anezka’s first law of lying: never go back on your lie.

“Which is it?”

“18,” I say. “I just turned 18.”

Cop reality shows had convinced me that smalltime criminals got caught because of stupidity. Although a case could be made for our lack of cognitive skills, as a whole we were just underprepared liars.

“Your social security number?”

I stare dumbly.

You have two choices,” he says. “You either answer, or go to jail.”

“Jail is the nicer one right?” I ask. “I mean prison is the one I really don’t want to go to right?”

It’s the cop’s turn to stare at me dumbly.

“How long would I be in for?” It seems like a reasonable question.

“Until someone fucking bails you out, but from the looks of things, I doubt anyone would pay five bucks to get you out, so you’ll be stuck in there until a judge decides to release you.”

I don’t particularly want to share a holding cell with addicts suffering from withdrawal, drunks sobering up, 18-year-old army recruits with nothing to lose and full dental plans, and racist Hawaiians on both sides of the bars. But, at least in movies, jail is a badge of honor, like a stint in the military. Of course, movies never show how jail and the military cultivate the coveted thousand-yard-stare by making men sit around for months on hard benches, with nothing but confined routine, talk of sex with other men’s girlfriends, and the constant threat of spontaneous violence to numb their thoughts. And I doubt jail will provide dental hygiene utensils that are up to my standards.

“What happens if I give you my social?”

The officer contemplates which nonlethal weapon is approved for negotiating with morons. Part of me wishes he had an idiot stick to deliver a swift punishment that would absolve my crimes. Absolution through corporal punishment. For me, waiting to be reprimanded has always been the worse punishment.

This officer isn't used to dealing with these kinds of questions at five in the morning. His job isn't to hold shy criminals' hands through the legal process. I half hope he'll just take me to jail before I further embarrass myself. Cellmates aside, I wouldn't mind spending a night or two in jail instead of paying a fine. It would give my day structure and purpose. I could write romantic postcards on the cardboard centers of toilet paper rolls. I could get a misspelled tattoo of Anezka's name. My one greater fear is of having to explain to potential employers this infraction on my criminal record, unless the interview is for a camping store or homeless outreach program.

“I'm not going to argue with you. What's your social?”

A filthy homeless man shifts in the back of the cruiser, his greasy locks smudging the oil stains on the window. I shudder at the thought of being handcuffed to him.

I recite my social. The officer doesn't even type it into his computer. For verification, he just makes me repeat it. Then, he asks my name. I spell it out. He asks my birthday. I write it down.

“That makes you 23.”

“Yeah.”

“You fucking lied.”

I clench my teeth, inviting the taser's sting. I want to escape these questions, to become a martyr of police brutality instead of a dumb criminal. And, if the electricity makes me soil myself, I doubt he'll put me in his cruiser.

When he asks for my address and phone number, I say I don't have these. I almost pity the cop. He's just doing his job, wanting to go home after a long night, and here he has to deal with me lying to protect a worthless, milk jug identity.

"If I had an address and phone number I wouldn't be out here."

"Occupation?"

I nearly laugh.

"Unemployed smoothie technician."

He rips off the ticket, slaps the copy against my chest, and puts the car in drive.

"Wait," I say, jogging beside his car.

"What? You want a lift?"

"That's it? What do I do now?"

"What the fuck you mean? You get your ass out of the park."

"The ticket doesn't have an amount."

"That's because you have to show up for a court date."

I study the ticket, keeping pace with the car. The court date is a month away—another month to be stuck in Oahu, collecting tickets.

"What? You have somewhere else to be?"

* * *

Downtown beggars sleep late, curled under soggy want ads and funny papers in the entrances of failed businesses. One jogs beside me, talking pidgin about how he's been homeless for two days. His woman kicked him out because he refused to get a job.

“Who needs a job? I can live on fish and fruit, yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“So, can you help me with some change for a little breakfast, yeah?”

I break off a piece of fermented bread. He looks at me like I'm crazy.

In the skyscraper that is city hall, I pinball between floors, pointed back down corridors and through doors by state employees who don't want to deal with the illegible carbon copy of my ticket. I end up in what looks like an empty post office. Chained pens coil on counters, and line dividers dictate the appropriate path to justice.

“It'll take at least a week before the ticket is even processed,” says a mid-thirties clerk named Margaret.

“But I'm leaving Monday.”

The lie comes naturally, perhaps because it could be true. Margaret's French tips stall over her keyboard. Her computer screen wallpaper features a giant slab of concave concrete.

“Is that here?” I ask, nodding to the computer.

“That's the Hoover Damn.”

“Most people back home have screen shots of beaches. You have concrete in the desert.”

Margaret's state employee issued expression is cracked by a smile connecting round cheeks. Her entire job entails dealing with petty liars and crooks who want to blame their troubles on her. I don't want to blame her; I want to use her.

"We get your situation all the time," she says, accepting the folded ticket from me. "Most people just don't show up to court."

"What happens if they don't?"

She shakes her head, as if wanting to dispense her professional advice that the Hawaiian legal system doesn't have the money to conduct a pan-pacific man hunt for an illegal camper, but she is sworn to keep such advice to herself no matter how seemingly obvious.

I sit on the pew style bench that runs the length of the narrow room to contemplate my next move. If I stay, I'll either have to wait on Oahu, exiled from the North Shore, and probably accumulate more tickets. Or I can fly to another island and chance getting taken in for an outstanding warrant. If nothing else, the ticket is an excuse to fly home where I doubt I'll hear anymore about the charge. I can even tell people back home I'm a fugitive forced off of Hawaii.

"Is there any way I can take care of this now?"

Margaret pops up from behind her desk, surprised to see me on the bench.

"I thought you left an hour ago," she says.

"Just been thinking," I say.

Something about my paranoia, the fact that I showed up in her office hours after the ticket was issued, plays on her sympathy. She calls friends in various departments, gossiping and relaying an increasingly dramatic version of the morning's events.

“He was just resting in the park, waiting for sunrise—he's some kind of poet—when this thug officer, probably one of the illiterate assholes who can't fill out a report, started hassling him like he robbed a bank.”

With each retelling, she grows more hostile. Her profession revolves around dealing with officers' screw ups. Unlike the majority of Hawaiians I meet, she likes tourists and hates the cops for giving vacationers tickets that she has to sort out. Mainlanders are the reason her property is now worth millions, making it possible for her to retire in a few years to a Las Vegas condo. Beyond that, she's generally interested in my dilemma. Finally, her job is living up to the claims made by trade school commercials about the “exciting” field of criminal justice. When I ask if she is neglecting her other duties, she shrugs. No matter how hard she works, she'll still get a quarter raise every year and the tickets will keep coming.

Margaret can't believe I'm in Hawaii alone, backpacking around the island. She says she could never do anything like that, as though she would ever want to. She can't even let her Chihuahua sleep outside.

“What you're doing is just so dangerous,” she says. Her profession deals exclusively in Hawaiian horror stories. “Bums stab each other over change just so they can buy meth. You're lucky they didn't attack you.”

“Do I really look like I have much worth robbing?”

“You’re giving these crazies too much credit. I had a guy in here who tried to rob a drive through bank on a bike.”

It’s far too easy to misrepresent myself to this soft faced woman who giggles at my jokes. If only she had been the ticketing officer, I could have told her my name was Tom Sawyer. If only more police officers were like her, as optimistic and as ready to help as high school career counselors. Of course then our streets would be filled with lazy criminals believing they were special and that they could accomplish anything they set their minds to. It’s best not to inspire underachieving thieves.

“Don’t you worry,” she says. “My cousin works in processing. When she locates the ticket, I’ll have her tear it up.”

Margaret’s investigation discovers that the police were doing a special operation that morning, acting as glorified janitors clearing the human detritus from the park before the paying tourists woke up. She also discovers that the ticketing officer is in the habit of sleeping after his shift with his phone off—a clear infraction of duty.

“How can you be on call if your phone is off!” she yells.

Outside, the cloudy sky offers an eternal dusk. I stretch out on the bench for one of the most restful naps of my trip, dozing off listening to Margaret’s soothing voice and her fingers tapping computer keys. I’m sheltered, safe, secure, with Margaret watching over me, offering me heart-shaped chocolates. Dreams are undisturbed by nightmares of giant centipedes crawling in my underwear and attempting to mate.

* * *

“I’ll come back in the morning?”

“Oh. Okay,” Margaret says. “I mean I would enjoy seeing you, but I don’t know if we’ll have made any progress by then. It could take a few weeks before the ticket even shows up. I mean, it may be one of those cases that just slips through the cracks.”

“I’ll see you in the morning,” I say. I cannot deal with the uncertainty of a warrant possibly being issued for me.

“Where will you go?”

I shrug.

“I’d invite you to sleep in my backyard with my Chihuahua to protect you, but I have a teenage daughter, and...” She smiles.

“I understand,” I say, with a wink and I push through the door.

* * *

At the homeless club, the Hawaiian State Public Library branch, I’m kicked off the internet for lacking a library card. From there I wander to a YMCA that charges the same to share a room as a rural Texas motor court does for the honeymoon suite.

“Do y’all offer any kind of work-trade program?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” says the attractive teenager. She calls over her male manager, who is slightly older than me and has even less sympathy than I for the homeless.

* * *

“The entire police department is looking for your ticket,” Margaret says as a greeting the next morning.

An oversized hibiscus flower blooms behind her ear, complimenting the flora of makeup coloring her smooth, Asian features. Her penchant for hyperbole is part of her

appeal. She believes I'm a kind of noble loner, adventuring across Hawaii in search of beauty. She has turned my absurd encounter with the cops into a daytime drama, a battle between good and evil.

The difficulty in locating my ticket arose because the officer borrowed a colleague's ticket pad—another violation of protocol.

“You can believe those pigs will catch hell for that,” Margaret smiles, clenching gum between perfect teeth.

The thought of how many taxpayers' dollars are spent searching for my ticket, and the face of the reprimanded officer boiling with hate, enlivens my sense of justice.

This satisfaction dissolves almost instantly. An enormous effort is being made to find my ticket based on the premise that I'm leaving Oahu on Monday. Eventually, some authority will test this lie. And, the last thing I need is a pissed off officer looking to get even with me. All he would have to do is show up at my hearing and enlighten the judge on the list of lies I fed him.

I stretch out on the bench in attempt to assuage my fears. I wake to a female officer standing over me with a clipboard, demanding my license. She studies me against the photo as if matching my face to a sketch artist's depiction.

“Follow me.”

I do. She leads me to the doors of courtroom C7, then turns abruptly on me, blocking the entrance.

“You're leaving Monday?” she asks, her face, inches from mine.

My teeth habitually grate against my tongue. In all the excitement, I hadn't had time to brush, and now I struggle not to shy away from this confrontation for fear of looking like a liar.

"Planning to," I say, shrouding her in complimentary coffee breath.

"You have any proof?"

"A ticket. Online."

Her hard gaze tests my resolve. Working in the criminal division, she understands language is nothing more than varying degrees of falsities. She isn't concerned with validating my statement, only in ensuring that I have the balls to stick to it.

Huddled criminals dot the pews like bums sitting through a church service for the free soup at the conclusion. The judge is a kind-faced white woman with the kind of short bobbed hair meant to sit atop the heads of chemo patients and hints of a solid build beneath her black robe—the hallmarks of a female politician.

A mix of American and Hawaiian flags hang on panel walls. The room lacks windows to prevent people from jumping out, physically or mentally. The repentant and rebellious sit scattered about the pews in broken tennis shoes and sloppy t-shirts tucked into stained jeans. Other than the legal workers and boys in military dress, I'm the most stylish criminal. With a palm full of saliva, I flattened my hair and iron the wrinkles running the length of my button down white dress shirt and khakis. The only thing that betrays me is the stink of my stuffed pack and shoes.

A large percentage of the cases involve military men running wild off base. One was caught with a butterfly knife while two others were busted drinking under twenty-

one—both of which are legal on military property. Two young soldiers snicker while their lawyer enters a plea of not guilty for an assault charge. The Hawaiian boy on the other side of the fight stands alone and pleads guilty. I'd have felt bad for the local had he not looked exactly like the teenage boys who yell at me from the back of mopeds. What looks like an old miner with a scraggly white beard and a leather hat is also charged with illegal camping. He claims he's moving to Virginia and needs an accelerated court date. He's given jail time.

The prosecutor, a short Asian woman who fills out her pressed shirt and pencil skirt with the aftereffects of business lunches, plows through hundreds of cases, demanding warrants for absent defendants—the most common type of defendant. If every criminal had appeared, not only would the courtroom violate fire codes, but the legal system would grind to a standstill. Justice revolves around the assumption that criminals are too lazy to confront their accusers.

The prosecutor reads my name as a question. She has an abrupt name like Ms. Pow. I push through the saloon-style doors and assume the position at the lectern: bent over the microphone with idle hands clasped behind my back. My body inherently knows this supplicating pose. The prosecutor stares at a degraded photocopy of the illegible carbon copy of my ticket. For the first time all morning, she hesitates.

“Your honor,” Ms. Pow says, regaining her composure. “I can't prosecute this case until the other tag is found. The violation is illegible.”

“And he’s leaving Monday,” the judge says, almost laughing at the absurdity which she presides over daily. The judge asks for a recess to contemplate my case. I hadn’t realized my situation is so complex that it requires a recess.

When the judge vanishes into her chambers, Ms. Pow confronts me.

“Watch what you say in front of me because I’m prosecuting you.”

I wasn’t used to a woman being this straightforward about her propensity for twisting my words against me.

“I don’t feel comfortable charging you based on your word that this ticket is for illegal camping.”

Women generally make me nervous, but she has it down to a science. To keep my composure, I convince myself that she must counteract her lust for me through verbal violence. Of course, I again struggle with the discomfort of answering her head on, and further feed her rage with my coffee breath.

“Okay?”

Her shark black eyes track my every hesitation. She wants a man who can hold his own against her, or maybe she just wants a submissive partner she can handcuff and humiliate. Control turns her on.

“I can show it to you if you want?” I say.

“Excuse me?”

“My copy of the ticket.”

“Unnecessary.”

Ms. Pow explains the different pleas and what they mean. I nod as though I understand. She speaks within inches of my face, daring me to flinch. I envision vinegary particles wafting up from my shoes and filling her tiny nostrils. I retreat into the safety of delusion. We'd meet later in a nearby bar, where happy hour would turn into wine at her downtown apartment. Clothes will be draped on tipped-over furniture, leading to a pile of flesh nestled in throw pillows on her authentic Asian rug glowing in the orange light of a fire roaring on the fireplace plasma screen. Her body will be held in place by an intricate network of black lace secured with buttons, hooks, and wires. This scene will fade into us rolling around lavender sheets that softened the NC-17 rated violence of lust. The aggressive mood music will rise as we blend into a montage of tongues flickering across curves, skin red with handprints, open mouths and clinched eyelids. In the excitement, the camera will spin off our whirlwind of flesh to underwear blindfolding the miniature statue of a busty Lady Justice.

The judge returns. An officer with blue latex gloves escorts in a line of men looking as though they were hooked on a trotline. Clothes salvaged from thrift store dumpsters droop from drug addled frames. They are my audience, my spiritual jury, and my potential roommates if the judge rejects my stupidity plea. If only I knew how to register my objection that the prospect of going to jail for illegal camping is counterproductive; illegal camping is its own punishment.

“I wish to postpone prosecution,” Ms. Pow barks.

The line of criminals winces at her voice. They swing their arms as if playing Red Rover, waiting to call me over.

“What do you wish to do?” the judge asks.

I didn't realize I had a say. From my limited experience, I know that this court banter is like flirting, full of half-truths and spin. The judge wants a confident defendant who knows what he wants, and how to choose his words, but who can also own up to his mistakes and beg for mercy like a man.

“I'd like the court to accept my plea of no contest and for a motion of deferred adjudication.”

“Do you understand what that means?” Ms. Pow glances at me. I had no clue.

“Yes?”

“Okay,” the judge says, her mercy melting over me like massage oil. “I just have a few questions.” Her smile flat-lines beneath fresh lipstick. “What are you doing in Hawaii?”

I hesitate. For all the times I've been asked this question, I should have come up with a reasonable answer, at least some standard lie that sounds good and spoke to my romantic need to find something more, something beautiful beyond my mainland routines. I can't very well stand up here, before the court, the court's god, and my fellow petty criminals, and say, I want to learn how to be satisfied with not being an international sex symbol and glamorous underwear model.

“Hawaii is beautiful,” I say. It's more appealing to appear mysterious than pathetic.

“Where have you been sleeping?”

“With friends on the North Shore. A few campgrounds.”

I thought the cross-examinations of *Court TV* were fake, that judges simply call out sentences and fines the way contestants shout numbers on *The Price is Right*. My gaze searches for something to solidify my resolve. I find a portrait of George W. Bush grinning, as if to say, "It ain't a lie if you believe it." I take a deep breath. If the truth got me into this fix, then lies will set me free. I have to be confident. Women love confident liars.

"Where'd you stay last night?"

"The YMCA on Pali Highway." I smooth my hair, paranoid of a grass blade sticking up like a flag pole.

"What happened the morning you were picked up?"

"I ended up in Waikiki late the night before. The nearest hostel was full or closed."

"Which hostile?"

"The one that intersects that beach road."

"The name."

"Wana'nani," I say, considering adding more vowels. "Something like that."

"And you have your return ticket for Monday?"

"Yes?"

"Where is it?"

"The ticket? It's online."

"So when we call the airline they'll confirm you have a flight booked?"

My eyes wander from her face. I try to recall which way liars look. Is it right? My right or her right? Which way do honest people look? Probably not at her stony chest.

“I hope so.” I grin, trying to short-circuit her feminine intuition with telepathic visions of me pitching a tent beneath her gown.

“Do you have a job in Texas?”

Having spent the preceding weeks with trust-fund hippies, my impulse is to say I’m an artist, but I revert to the standard line I used at college graduation.

“I have a job working on a stretch of land just outside the city, clearing brush and tending livestock.”

Never mind that the “stretch of land” is three acres, or that the “livestock” includes pampered chickens and three older men. She gazes at me, sizing me up for boots, a cowboy hat, and the chaps I’ll wear while scrubbing her pool. If there’s one thing I understand, it’s fantasy. No one wants to dream of an affair with an unemployed loser.

“I’ll accept your plea.”

I smile. How could she resist me?

“Do you understand that the maximum fine is a thousand dollars and thirty days in jail?”

That tricky bitch! She probably got off on building guys up just to pound them down with her gavel. She’s probably in cahoots with Ms. Pow, planning to violate me in the hull of a sheriff’s van, using mace, night sticks, handcuffs, and tasers as sexual aids.

“Yes,” I say, “I understand.”

I take faith in apathy, in the fact that the court is too busy with real criminals to check anything I've said. It's as good a thing as any to believe.

* * *

After paying a hefty fine, my innocence is restored. With my newfound freedom I return to a beach park. The night is haunted by voices and conspiring flashlights. I sleep beyond the groomed section of the campgrounds, in the absolute dark of the wooded canopy. Cold overpowers my jackets. The tree-fall crackles with steps. I refuse to turn on my head lamp and give away my position. An ant moves across my lips. I open my mouth and swallow the scout before others follow.

Chapter Fifteen

Like my father on Sunday mornings, and now every morning since his early retirement, I sit in an empty McDonald's booth with an abandoned newspaper and a cold coffee. Truncated, commercial versions of Hawaiian music play over frozen food resurrected in boiling grease. I can't concentrate enough to finish reading an entire article. My eyes drift to a pleasantly plump couple using plastic forks to stab pancakes and sausages soggy with syrup. The more their consumption slows, the more my mouth waters. But then they pile their empty sugar packets and wadded napkins atop their scraps and dump the trash.

The employees aren't paid enough to care if I loiter, cleaning up what others leave behind. I read the Old Testament, less interested in the stories than how their significance has changed over time, adapting like social DNA or a classic text formatted to fit a movie screen. I too am a palimpsest, the living text of ancestors, revised, translated, and adapted—though I can't help but suspect my contributions will be discarded, like the Gospel according to Judas.

“Sal,” a voice calls.

To offset his military hair cut, Sam wears loose mountain climbing clothes from Mocean's organic hemp line. He slides two wrapped Egg McMuffins and a worn copy of the *Qur'an* on my table then sits. He smells of an all-night beach fire.

“We were wondering what happened to you,” he says rubbing sand from his eyes.

“Who’s we?”

“Everyone. You were a hot topic at the bonfire last night. We all had different theories.”

“What was yours?”

“Me. I was worried you joined the army.”

“I may yet. Is Britney mad?”

“Not mad. More worried. She understands though, I think.”

At the nightly bonfires, Sam and I were often confused for our sinewy frames and short dirty blonde hair. We were shadows sitting outside the first ring of people discussing head shop versions of chakras and the I Ching.

“This is my one indulgence of Babylon,” he says, catching me staring at his Egg McMuffin. “When I was on the streets in Philly, I practically lived on these.”

He shoots the second sandwich across the table to my folded hands. I try to refuse but he insists then laughs at how quickly I devour the breakfast biscuit and pick over the crumbs with a wet fingertip.

“What are you doing today?” he asks.

“You’re looking at it.”

“Then you’re going hiking with me,” he says. “You’re probably the only one of my nonmilitary friends who could keep up.”

We pile into his car and shoot off to see his 18-year-old Brazilian pot dealer, Paulo. Paulo’s cousin is dating a famous surfboard shaper who owns a mansion on Sunset Beach. The walls are lined with functional and ornamental surfboards standing like

support beams. Photos of surf contests and candid pictures of pro surfers take the place of windows on the lower floor. The second story is devoted to a panoramic view of waves gathering from the ripples along the horizon, pushing the breeze through the open windows. The place is decorated straight out of a surf publication, and is in fact featured in several magazines stretched open on the coffee table beneath pot flakes.

Sam wants to buy some weed for the summit. Paulo doesn't have any to sell, only to smoke. Paulo's weed habit costs more on the island than his mother's allowance covers. The two match bong hits. Paulo becomes increasingly confused by the term "hiking."

"You just walk the mountains?" he says. "Just walk up those fuckers?"

The meaning is lost somewhere between his bad English and our bad Spanish. The more he tries to figure out what we're doing, the more the idea delights him. Suddenly he's running around the mansion, collecting supplies for our hiking "journey." He tries on several pairs of stylishly dainty shoes, then gets distracted to demonstrate Brazilian jujitsu moves, which consist of Paulo falling while Sam wrestles to keep his opponent from smacking his head on the coffee table. Paulo disappears for thirty minutes to fill his fanny pack with snacks, then returns without his shoes or shirt, carrying a giant bowl of popcorn. I sit back and eat everything Paulo brings us.

* * *

Drunk, high, and love-struck over another Mocean regular, Michelle, Sam rolls a cigarette in one hand while shifting gears with the other. The car wanders over the double

yellow. Headlights and reflective signs materialize and vanish at increasing speeds. My pack sits on my lap like a waiting airbag.

“There!” Sam tracks a stationary form on the edge of the pineapple fields.

A man stands in an alcove of chest high grass, glancing at us before cowering from the light.

“Three days he’s been standing there.”

The drifter’s clothes sag like the hide of a starved animal, but they’re clean and modern.

“Stopped once to ask if he needed a ride. He just looked past me at the cars.”

Sam considers the approaching headlights. Using the wet tip of his cigarette, he traces the veins spiraling around his forearm toward the stick shift.

“I used to be like that,” Sam says. “Did shit like that. Had a problem with heroin. Still do I guess. I get these strange cravings to jab shit into my arms, as if the sensation of a needle is what really triggered the high. It’s weird. It’s like those phantom sensations, like when guys come back and they can feel toes on their missing legs.”

He curls his right arm, lifting an invisible weight. Sam used to be homeless in New York. After that he dealt meth in San Diego until he got his head smashed by a baseball bat. A girlfriend took him in, but she had a thing for breaking glasses on his face. He knocked her down once for that, so she dropped him off at the train station in the dead of winter. His grandparents took him in under the condition that he wouldn’t smoke in the house. He drank all their liquor and smoked in the house. On the day they were kicking him out, an army recruiter called.

“I just thought, you know, my entire life I’ve been a quitter. I quit boy scouts, karate, baseball, school, jobs, relationships—I wanted to finish something.”

He accelerates toward the gate at the entrance of Schofield Barracks. A guard steps in front of the car, then bends down to peer into Sam’s window. His nose crinkles against the stench of wine and weed.

“Who’s that?”

Sam considers me. “My little brother.”

The guard waves us in.

Schofield Barracks is like a college campus absent of any aesthetic décor besides outdated weaponry serving as statues. Groups of soldiers jog in formation. Level grass lines rows of identical homes. Rectangular buildings serve as monuments to efficiency. This fits my childhood vision of a communist city: a gray, utilitarian world surrounded by fences and guns.

At Sam’s door we’re met by a well groomed man of Middle Eastern heritage.

“Passing of the guard,” Sam says, mock saluting. “It’s cold out, Mo. You remember to put on your suicide bomber’s smock?”

“I must have left it at your mother’s place,” Mo says, holding the door for us as he steps out. “If you free-loving fucks are having a gay orgy, leave my massage oils out of it?”

“Don’t be jealous that we’re getting some action while you’re going to hang out with your terrorist friends and talk about how many virgins you’re going to bang in heaven.”

Mo marches away, flicking us off. Sam unloads organic junk food from the refrigerator and throws it back to me.

“Mo just signed up for four more years. I swear that fucker would get an army issued wife if they had them.” Sam contemplates the expiration date on a jar of salsa. “Of course those terrorists are all about arranged marriages. That’s why they’re so pissed all the time.”

We lounge in Sam’s dorm of an apartment room, washing down sweet potato chips with oatmeal flavored beer. Other than his uniforms and polished shoes, the only clothes in his closet came from Mocean. His room is bare except for a mixture of military items and new age paraphernalia piled in a mound on the floor. These are the sum of Sam’s effects, most of which he returned from Iraq with or got out of storage. Now, he must decide what to take with him into civilian life. He picks through the pile and throws surplus items at me: a camouflage hat, fire starters, a sewing kit, socks, and some brass buttons.

“How do you not have more stuff than this?”

“Just before I joined up, I got drunk on the streets and lost my pack,” he says.

“Only thing I had left was my ticket to boot camp.”

I stack books on his nightstand, most of which have Zen in the title. He describes one novel I don’t recognize. He hasn’t finished it but apparently the ending is super trippy because it feeds back into the beginning, trapping the main character in a kind of literary purgatory. I imagine the situation similar to being locked in a library after the apocalypse, eating leather-bound books for nourishment. Slobbering philosophy, we

arrive at the drunken consensus that Zion and Babylon, heaven and hell, are here and now. Sam says he's glad he joined the army, but he's happier he's getting out. Now, he's free to do anything. He can go to college in Sweden with Michelle, or buy a sailboat. He spoke to a guy just the other day who offered to get him a job as a sushi chef's assistant.

I felt the exact same freedom standing in a sea of matching graduates beneath the thud of pomp and circumstance, before I confronted the questions of what I was going to do now. I doubt Sam and I are any better for choosing the unknown than conformists like Mo. What is gained from falling out of rank to spend our nights drunkenly discussing books like, *The Art of Sitting*? Neither his war nor my college could cure us of our indecision. We're stuck with the same questions, with wishy-washy ideals that aren't nearly as cute as they were in our teens. We're a legion of drifters, boys standing on road sides, trying to grow beards, shrinking in our clothes, forgetting what we're waiting for. Compasses don't work here. Magnetic north is compromised by the tangles of electric wires and paved roads searching this land for new destinations.

Sam flips through a leather journal. The writing on the first few pages is erased by the empty white of all the following pages. He closes the book and slides it under his bed.

He tells me about the desert war. He prayed he wouldn't have to shoot anyone, but he would have if the situation called for it. Sam was known as the hippie in his squad. He bitched at troops for littering when patrolling the rubble of cities. He even fell in love with a shoeless Gypsy begging at their camp's gates. He tells me about his sergeant, who convinced the Iraqi patrol they were training that the cubes of meat in their lunch were chicken. When the Muslims discovered the food was ham, they all forced themselves to

vomit while Sam's sergeant just laughed. Sam was livid. He was ready to piss on the sergeant's Bible until a toothless Iraqi soldier stopped him, and told him that his sergeant was not a gentleman. That Sam was. This was his favorite war story.

Sam only had one fatal war story. It involved his best friend, Jim, a gung-ho guy who would do anything just to prove he was crazy. While guarding the election houses, Jim found an old pistol strung together with electrical tape and wood. A fellow soldier dared him to play Russian Roulette with it. Under penalty of court marshal, none of the troops would explain what really happened. If they did, Jim's wife and kids would lose their benefits.

Sam's redheaded friend opens the door without knocking. He stands in the door delivering the latest update on this local who got pregnant and wants to keep the kid in order to get his army benefits. In the morning he's volunteering for another tour just so he doesn't have to deal with this woman or his wife and kids back home.

"What do you think that huge scar on his lip is from?" Sam asks when the man stumbles on to the next door.

"Shrapnel?"

Sam shakes his head. "A stiletto heel."

I had never been more jealous of a scar. Even if the army doesn't contain a fraction of the excitement advertised on recruitment commercials, it offered scars like these. Maybe Sam hadn't fired his weapon, had lived through days so regimented with routine that he hadn't seen fit to write about them in his journal, but still, he had marched through the desert, through devastation, and had returned to tell his vacant tales.

Sam's father was a Green Beret in Vietnam. When Sam was young, his old man told him stories about secret missions where five guys knocked out entire platoons. When Sam was older, the stories changed. His father told him about the time he was on leave, and fell asleep driving. He woke in a hospital with who he thought was Jesus at the foot of this bed. This Jesus was just a bearded hippie handing out flowers, but at that moment he realized neither he nor the Vietnamese wanted to die. He became very anti-war, as well as an LSD enthusiast. He wore pink sunglasses to drill practice, and stood in front of the officers club handing out antiwar pamphlets. The army finally busted him for selling LSD to soldiers, as this was his form of antiwar propaganda. But, he still received an honorable discharge as he knew firsthand about the government's illegal activities in Cambodia. Sam smiles, though it's unclear which side of his father he's more proud of.

Months before, during my last semester in college, I took a 1960s American literature class because Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* was on the reading list. As an English major I had marched in protests against the desert wars. My Black Arts class even took a field trip to sit in the middle of a busy intersection with fellow protestors, hoping to get pepper sprayed, blasted with fire hoses, or arrested so we wouldn't have to sit there all day. Except for Kerouac, who actually supported the Vietnam War, the 60s literature focused on anti-war rhetoric. The understanding was that education is synonymous with passivity. One of the more interesting reads was a memoir by an ex-member of the radical anti-war group, The Weather Underground, who, among their other nefarious deeds, bombed the Pentagon. The author admitted that he nearly joined the army until he fell in love with a woman and her group of friends who opposed the

war. As the 2004 presidential election was heating up that final semester, our class period often launched into conspiracy theories of what Bush would do if re-elected. More than a few believed he would expand the war and reinstate the draft. Considering that I would be an unemployed college graduate at the start of Bush's second term, and therefore at the top of the list of potential draftees, I was quietly excited. I could never willingly sign up for the army, but I wouldn't refuse conscription. I would tell my friends that I didn't have a choice. I would draw peace signs on my helmet and bitch about how futile the war was while spraying automatic fire at masked enemies. I would come back with tattoos of my unit's insignia. I'd drink with old veterans and call civilians pussies. And, even if my teeth got kicked in, the government would replace them, and keep replacing them for the rest of my life. But I was no soldier. I was a homeless kid, hiding from the night in the room of a veteran who was younger than me.

"Michelle is such a gnarly chick," Sam says, drifting into sleep. "You think she likes me?"

Sexual confidence is one of the things the army couldn't teach Sam. He's been trapped marching in step with so many physically fit men, fighting for a small pool of women on base, that he has no idea how beautiful he is. He's afraid Michelle won't like him because he's a military man and she's half-hippie. The only thing I know about relationships, is that when it comes to love, ideals and sense are the first to be forsaken.

"You're an idiot," I say.

"I'm not the one who left my girlfriend home so I could sleep in parks."

* * *

Sam lies across the width of his bed, head pillowed on the wall, his tan t-shirt tucked into baggy, cargo pants bunched around his boots. The smoke from a hand rolled cigarette unfurls in ribbons, catching the rising sun passing through a window sticker that reads, "Be more against war." Multicolored Tibetan prayer flags flutter between the curtain frames, releasing their prayers with each gust of air conditioning. Sam strums rudimentary blues riffs on an acoustic guitar. With each stroke, dust swirls into the stream of window light. He is scheduled to guard a two ton locked box within two sets of barbed wire, inside a secured military base, for eight hours. The box contains flat screen TVs.

When he leaves, I straighten his room for inspections, though he insists that he wants to fail inspections for once, just to see what happens. The rest of the day I work out, read, and finish the six light beers Mo left for me. Outside, rain clouds turn the world gray. Droplets cling to the window. My departure time is pushed back.

Sam's cell phone rings. "Michelle" pops up on the screen.

"Sam is working," I say.

"I was actually calling for you," she says. "So how was your day?"

"My day?" I have grown unaccustomed to small talk or people who are genuinely interested in the mundane routines of my day. "Fine, I guess. I'm actually about to leave."

"You know where you're going?"

"Have an idea."

"I'd invite you to stay with me but my landlord lives next door. He rents the place to me for cheap on the condition that I don't have guys over."

“Your landlord sounds like an ex.” The line goes silent. “I’d invite you to stay with me but rain is only sexy in the movies.”

“You should call me sometime.”

“I should?”

“Yeah you should. I’ll come pick you up. We can hangout. You just have to promise to call.”

“I’ll call.”

Sam’s drill instructor bursts through the door with Sam behind him. The instructor stares at me sitting on the bed in Sam’s camouflage cap, surveying the wet world outside.

“Sweet Jesus Worthington, are you harboring a little Mary Anne in your room? Am I going to find another one tied up in the closet?”

I heft my pack and walk to the door.

“You don’t have to leave,” Sam says, chuckling.

His superior, who isn’t much older than either of us, stares at me. I can’t tell if his livid expression is sarcastic or genuine.

“Call me,” Sam yells.

From half a block away I can still hear the officer yelling about faggots, albeit clean faggots.

Chapter Sixteen

A corroded sign points up the summit trail and down to a stream pool. The babble of water lures me to water trickling over round stones and collecting in swirling pools. I follow the creek up stream, shimmying over slick boulders. The pool above the first is filled by a five foot waterfall. The next is fed by a one story waterslide. A flat stone sits beside the water, looking like the perfect place to camp, save for the impending mudslides. I soak in the pool, dancing on the mossy rocks and kicking lobster sized prawns. A yellow rope laces through the threads of white water tumbling down the rocks. I take faith in the nylon skiing rope and climb with the water pouring over me. At the top is a pond fed by water oozing down the sheer face of a three story stone wall, looking like clear lava pulsing from the mountain peak. Ripples continually fan out from the falls, pushing yellow leaves against the banks. It's a clear end to my hike and as near my vision of a fountain of youth as I could hope for.

Miles from anyone, I float facedown, listening to the water gurgle and the mountain shift. The gray sky chills my exposed back. I think of Texas, of holding a rung of barbed wire fence for Anezka to crawl under as we sneak down to a private swimming hole vacant due to an impending summer thunder storm. We sit in the meadow, drinking cherry cokes spiked with bourbon. She assaults me with soggy blackberries. I chase her through waist high grass erupting with grasshoppers and birds until we both jump into the cold, silent water.

“I no longer love the person who left me,” Anezka said the last time we spoke.

“Good,” I said.

“I’ve changed,” she said.

“Good.”

Somewhere beneath the click of rocks and the water replenishing itself, I hear others. A cannonball blast erupts from the pool below, followed by a splash of voices. If these are rowdy locals sent up by the dog fighters I asked directions from, I’ll have nowhere to run. I lean over the edge of my little paradise. A blonde muscular boy climbs the rope followed by several girls in single piece bathing suits and shorts cut from sweat pants. He thanks me for giving him a hand up. His name is Jon. Mine is Walt. He leaps into the garden pool with all his clothes on, followed by his harem of giggling girls.

Jon invites me back down the rock ledge. He wants to show me something.

“Girls only hold you back,” he says with a grin.

A few pools below where the trail meets the stream, the creek funnels over a ledge into a hot tub-sized pool a few stories down.

“Jump,” Jon says, flashing his perfect teeth.

I step over the ledge. The cold, violent air rushes to greet me. I’m transported back to that same Texas swimming hole, leaping from titanic cypress trees into the shadow of a creek below. The water thunders into silence. I fizzle to the surface.

Jon and I are instant playground friends challenging each other with daredevil tricks. We take turns jumping, always upping the stakes with twists and flips. The thrill of falling into the unknown, those few seconds of floating free of everything, between

security and tragedy, has always mesmerized me. It's the closest I could come to my childhood obsession with flight when I repeatedly leaped off roofs with cardboard wings.

The possibility of rain troubles Jon more than me. He assumes I'll follow them down. I do. I've come to realize that most invitations are far more entertaining than braving the wild alone. And, I can always return the next day to sit alone on the mountain and meditate on the virtues of loneliness.

The girls visiting from BYU lag behind. A cute, older redhead named Amy, who lives on Oahu walks ahead with Jon and me. Jon just completed two years of mission work in Cambodia, of which all he remembers is sitting in airplanes, buses, hotel lobbies, and restaurants.

"You religious Walt?" he asks.

"I'm reading the Bible."

He describes how Cambodians are a mix of Hindus and Buddhists. He never really understood their religions, but claims most of the followers didn't either. He knew enough to figure out the holes and fill in the real answers.

"Their religions aren't bad," he says. "But nobody actually follows them. Even the Buddhist monks aren't really religious. Most just became monks to have stable lives."

"Isn't that why most people find religion?"

"Because they're missing something, yeah."

"I mean, isn't that why we do everything. We eat because we're hungry. Fall in love because we're lonely. Cheat because we're horny."

"What religion did you say you were again, Walt?"

I shrug. “We all have our own personal religions. Ways to cope with loss.”

“Loss? A religion based on loss doesn’t sound too appealing.”

I don’t argue. He has far more answers than I have questions.

We wait for the visiting girls to catch up in a bluff with a single tree shading the blonde grass. Jon lists all the names of the plants he learned while working at the Polynesian Cultural Centre. He picks pink fruit from thin, soft wood plants and hands us the strawberry guavas to eat while he “rounds up the hotties.”

Amy and I sit in the bow of the tree that twists over the path. Our feet dangle from the branch. I spit the seeds into a handkerchief to mail home, until Amy starts spitting her seeds at me and I have to fire back.

“I hate waiting,” she says when we run out of seeds. “I’ve spent my whole life waiting.”

I nod. “In junior high I used to walk an hour to school instead of waiting for the city bus. It took the same time, but I’m too impatient. That’s why I’m here. Impatient to do something.”

“I’m like that too. I was so anxious to get married I almost did, but with the wrong guy.”

“Yeah, my impatience always gets me in situations where I end up wasting more time than I otherwise would.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“I guess I like to feel in control.”

She watches her dirty legs kicking the air. “I could never do something like what you’re doing,” she says. “I’m too shy.”

“I’m shy,” I say. “But sometimes I guess you only have to be brave enough to take that first step off whatever ledge you’re stuck on.”

I strain to keep from rolling my eyes at how I’m trying to make myself sound like a stoic pilgrim sojourning in the mountains to commune with God. But, this is what strangers do, they meet and talk about grand philosophies. Lovers and friends know you too well to let any of this bullshit fly. All of the supposedly great adventurers must have been good talkers first, like Odysseus, changing the memory of even the men who were with him into believing they battled Cyclopes and sea monsters. These men had plenty of time to invent good stories, to fill the mundane with vivid details, to find some true connection in a brief encounter between two aging kids sitting in a tree on the top of a mountain.

“Aren’t your parents worried?”

I haven’t considered my parents for weeks. The realization gives me pause.

“We care about each other, but we don’t worry about each other. My parents figure anything I do will at least be as good as what they did.”

“Surely someone is worried about you.”

I fold and unfold the handkerchief, rubbing the globs of fruit from the seeds.

“Worried isn’t the right word,” I say.

She looks back up the trail. The others are coming. “Where will you go next?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Who I meet?”

She jumps down and I follow. She reaches to hand me my pack, but it’s heavier than she expects.

“Why didn’t you just leave your things back at your hotel?”

* * *

College students collect behind the Polynesian Cultural Centre. Hawaiian music pushes out the backdoors. Guys and girls wear long skirts beneath blue or red button up shirts. I keep expecting a choreographed dance-fight and musical number to burst out.

“What’s your name,” asks a boy at the gate with a clipboard.

I expect him to search for my name on the list. Instead, he merely jots it down and adds my fake address to his mailing list.

In line, I wait to graze through the steaming vats leftover from the Centre’s nightly luau. I load two Styrofoam boxes with Chinese chicken, shredded pork, mixed veggies, Thai noodles, yams, and cake squares. The clerk weighs my containers; it’s three dollars for my three pounds of food.

“Walt,” someone shouts as I hurry my food to the nearest picnic table.

I expect to see the gatekeeper calling me back to attend the required pre-dinner lecture on how to purchase a timeshare in heaven. Instead it’s Jon flanked by a squatty man who, in other circles, would be mistaken for Jon’s lover.

“You want to have dinner with us?”

“I don’t want to spoil whatever y’all have going.”

“It’ll be fun. We’ll make it a threesome.”

In the front seat of Jon’s convertible, the two tickle and pinch each other. Arun is one of Jon’s Cambodian converts who is here on a work study program and scholarship. Jon explains how Arun thinks that after he graduates, he’s going to return to his country to start a discotheque and casino, but Arun won’t do that because it’s against God’s way. Arun nods.

When the little man discovers I’m from Texas he can’t stop yelping, “Ye-haw,” as he pretends to ride a stick horse.

Having waited an extra hour to eat after a day without food, I’m on edge. I want to do my impression of a ragged Cambodian peasant but I’m sure I’ll just come off as a demented version of myself.

We eat around Jon’s TV. Despite my hunger, the food is exceedingly awful, even for cold buffet food.

“Good, isn’t it?” Jon asks.

“It takes talent to make roasted pork taste like this,” I say.

Jon summons his father to join “the boys” in watching a bootlegged version of *Alexander*. When Rosario Dawson’s hedonistic breasts bounce on screen, Jon and his father avert their eyes, saying “Oh God.” Arun bows his head, peeping at the other two like a child watching his parents during a long dinner blessing. For the rest of the movie Jon and his father switch off berating the faggy subplot, which consists of a dainty Alexander staring into the eyeliner-wearing eyes of his best friend, Hephaestion.

“The director must have been a faggot,” Jon says after it’s over. “What do you think, Walt?”

“It was bad,” I say. “Alexander and Hephaistion would have been smelly, brutal men, and when they had sex with each other, it would have been manlier than any of those froufrou straight sex scenes.”

* * *

Shadows of half drunk campers waft around a dying fire. I dream of heat. I am standing in the airport terminal, beneath a freezing air-conditioning vent, my head pressed to the cool window overlooking an empty runway scarred with tire marks. Flight attendants frantically juggle between phones and PAs. On the watery meridian blurred by evaporating heat, a cloud mushrooms over the majestically polluted sunset. The horizon rises. The building begins to quake, amplifying the rising chaos echoing through the terminal. I stand pressed against the cold window, watching the heat coming, waiting. I’m a child, old enough to know there’s no escaping nightmares, but young enough to still have them.

Chapter Seventeen

Michelle's van is parked across several parking spaces in the empty Foodland lot with "I Buy Homes" painted across the sides in bright yellow letters. She paces, her wavy hair moving in torrents as she yells into her cell phone. A vein divides her forehead. She kisses my cheek and continues screaming about how her fucking boss makes her do everything, but what he doesn't realize is that one day she'll leave his ass and start a rival company.

She ends the call and chunks the phone in her van. "What are you up to?" she asks, turning to me.

"Living the dream," I say. "Just came down from the mountains."

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"That's so dangerous. You should have called me."

"You wouldn't have come."

"Yeah, but I'd have told you not to go."

She thumbs a smudge from my cheek and straightens my shirt. We sit on the floor of her van with our feet hanging out. Jack Johnson's acoustic songs play, easing the sun down. Michelle fishes a beer from the interior of her van, which looks one step away from being lived in. She hands me the beer to open as she sparks a Marlboro, inhales, and pushes the smoke out through her nostrils. I watch her.

“You like my nose?” she asks, pinching it to hide the tiny silver stud.

“I wasn’t looking at your nose.”

She waves this off. “I used to be a boxer. Knocked a few girls out, even with the headgear, and none of them could touch my nose. Finally some asshole in a bar busted it.”

“What?”

“He spilled a beer on my \$2000 Prada shoes so I clocked him. Funny thing is I was more worried about my shoes than getting hit.”

“You had \$2000 shoes.”

“Oh yeah. I used to be uppity.” She stretches her neck and pouts her lips. “I was engaged to this big shot realtor.”

“What happened?”

“I realized I was engaged to a big shot realtor.” She smiles. “You have any idea how much of a fake douche bag you have to be in order to be a successful, big shot realtor, your picture on fucking bus stops for homeless people to piss on?”

I don’t point out that she’s also a realtor, though admittedly not a successful one.

“He was such a fucking snore. So here I am, learning to be poor.” She snags the beer, rattles the loose contents, and drains it. “That what brought you here?”

“What?”

“You running from your ex?”

“She’s not my ex.”

“Not yet.”

“I’m not running. We trust each other.”

“Trust each other to do what?”

I just grin.

“Thought so.” She takes a long drag. “So why are you here?”

“I had to do something, before, you know, I settle down and all that.”

“Settle down!” Smoke streams through her laughter.

Her eyes stay on me, waiting for an explanation. I attempt to be elliptical, throwing in every cliché from “I’m trying to find myself,” to “I’m learning to love myself.” At one point I even mention something about a “vision quest” and a “walkabout.” But, it’s when I say how males are genetically programmed to venture out, to circulate the genes and spread wild seeds that she mutes her laughter against my shoulder.

Tour buses and rental cars plow through the afterglow.

She stands and drops her cigarette on the pavement. I stamp it out.

“You should stay on Oahu. Put some roots down. The market is hot here. The way things are looking, I’ll retire at fifty.”

I nod, wanting to say that I don’t want a retirement plan, that I see more sense in the Mocean hippies cashing in their retirements early, dooming their elderly selves to bag groceries for the health insurance benefits that will pay for skin cancer treatments. But, I don’t wholly believe this.

“Are you going to call me this time?”

“I called you last time,” I mutter, rubbing my eye to head off the flood of emotions the road and hunger have predisposed me to—to the feeling of loss I get each time I sense that I’ll soon be left alone, again.

“I love you, you know,” she says, pressing my head against her shoulder and rubbing my neck. My affections boil over. She never wanted me. To her, I am only someone to pity. My embrace goes limp. She catches my eyes for a moment then leans in. I turn. Her parted lips find the edge of my mouth.

Chapter Eighteen

“We no longer accept semen,” the receptionist says. “We’re a blood bank.”

I was so swept up in the fantasy of being paid to masturbate in a private room to classy porn that I failed to notice this distinction.

“What do I get for blood?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, do y’all pay donors?”

“For donations?”

If there’s a minimal intelligence exam required to bleed into a tube, I’d have surely flunked. It makes sense why these centers only operate on donations. Individuals desperate enough to hustle their blood probably carry more than just healthy plasma in their veins.

“We got shirts,” the receptionist says. Extra large blood bank shirts featuring cartoon hearts and corporate sponsors are quite the trend among transients. “Of course you’d have to come in several times and give a few pints before you become a silver star member and got a shirt.”

My fingers tap the counter.

“There’s also the satisfaction of knowing you’re helping out your fellow man.”

I rub the vinyl laminate on the counter.

“We also have free cookies and juice.”

* * *

I skip most of the questions on the paperwork while the receptionist asks preliminary questions.

“Are you on any medications?”

“Not anymore,” I say. “My medications ran out with my student health insurance in December.”

She checks “no” and moves on. Never mind the variety of illnesses my medications may have treated. The blood bank is only concerned with doctor prescribed contaminants.

“Have you eaten breakfast?”

Is there a minimal intelligence test to be a blood bank receptionist? If I had the money for breakfast I wouldn't be donating blood for cookies. She unleashes me on a continental breakfast fit for a motor lodge: orange juice, jelly donuts, coconut cookies, and manipoos (sweet rolls stuffed with meat).

My feast is interrupted when I'm called to the back by Ms. Chung, who stands compressed in a buttoned up, medical coat. She leads me to a windowless interrogation room and sits in a chair so close to mine that our knees touch.

“What are you doing in Hawaii,” she asks, emoting like an android programmed to spout pleasantries.

“Just, you know, sightseeing?”

“What sights have you seen?”

“The beach mostly. I've seen a lot of the beach.”

“You done any street work?”

“I’ve been walking a lot,” I say. “Wait. I don’t understand the question.”

“Have you done some tricking? Scored a few bucks hooking.”

I can’t help but smile, which only intensifies her expression. The slang terms sounds unsettlingly dirty coming from someone as clinical and asexual as Ms. Chung.

“No mama.”

“You know there are no recording devices in this room?”

The cell of a room is ornamented with posters featuring failed models beneath the headings, “She may look clean...”

Ms. Chung reviews my questionnaire with the intensity of an ethnically ambiguous investigative TV reporter studying her notes while the camera captures me squirming, preparing to be called an unconscionable liar by her pleasant, yet stern, non-regional dialect.

“Have you ever paid for sex... Have you ever had sex with someone who has had sex for money... Have you ever had sex with someone in a foreign country... Have you ever had sex with a man... Have you ever done intravenous drugs?”

“I haven’t even masturbated in more than a month,” I say to lessen the litany of “No.”

Ms. Chung is unimpressed. What have I been doing in Hawaii if not having unprotected sex with foreign prostitutes while mainlining heroin?

She abandons the yes or no questions to fill in the gaps I left on the questionnaire where I was supposed to detail my sexual conquests.

“How often do you engage in unprotected sex?”

I wasn't aware anyone outside of characters in movies actually had casual, unprotected sex. Was I the only one whose fear of disease and babies, combined with the residual effects of Catholic guilt and an obsessive personality, qualified as a form of impotency?

“I've only been in two serious relationships.”

“Okay. How many sexual partners have you had?”

“Two, but I've fooled around with a few more.”

“How many people have you engaged in vaginal or anal intercourse with?”

“Two, but the first one, she was younger than me, but she had had plenty of intercourse before, so that's like me sleeping with all the dudes she slept with right?”

Ms. Chung returns to questions about my experiences on the streets. She simply can't believe that I haven't given at least one or two rogue hummers behind corner stores.

“It's really not that uncommon for people to have sex in exchange for pills, maybe some Oxycontin, even a burger?”

How cheap do I look? I want to defend my paranoia, to justify my absolute fear of an act that is the essence of life for most people: for biologists, advertisers, entertainers, and even the procreation-obsessed religious. I want to say that STD tests don't screen for everything, that HIV can take six months to register in a blood test. I want to explain that condoms don't protect against everything, they aren't foolproof, that the first time I attempted casual sex with Anezka, the condom broke, leaving me staring at the ceiling the entire night despite Anezka's assurance that she only had sex with her former

boyfriend, who was also a virgin, that she had recently been tested, that she was on birth control, and that she had no qualms about tossing a live baby in a dumpster, let alone vacuuming a parasite of a fetus from her uterus. Suddenly, I'm twenty again, sweating in a tiny office while a large, middle-aged counselor studies the complete absence of a sexual history in my file with a troubled look I doubt he even unveiled on patients who tested positive for terminal STDs. This look only worsened when I told him the kinkiest thing I had done was probably when the clinic nurse stuck a Q-tip in my urethra. He dismissed my excuses that I was there in solidarity with friends, that I wanted to ensure I was starting with a clean slate. When I argued that I could have caught a disease from oral sex, he gazed at the poster reading, "Be wise, condomize," and in his baritone, Barry White bellow said, "Theoretically." He advised me to publish my negative STD results in a personals ad. Instead I hosted a house party and stuck the slip on the fridge. That night I ended up in bed, snuggling fully clothed with a high school girl.

"Is your blood safe?" Ms. Chung finally asks.

"I think so. It seems to work well enough for me."

Ms. Chung is disappointed. She turns me over to a nurse in the empty donation center. Senses are dulled by ammonia and the light perfume of the thick nurse leaning on me as she speaks in a hypnotic whisper without expecting answers. She rubs my shoulders. She tells me I'm carrying a lot of stress. A muted morning cartoon flashes above the constant mechanical hum of machines sucking blood. My breathing slows. My blood spurts playfully into an IV bag.

When it's over, the nurse helps me from the chair and leads me by the hand back to the snack bar where I sit and work through a few more plates of sugary sweets.

"Treat yourself like a king," the receptionist says when I stand, food drunk, and wipe crumbs from my lips. "Don't lift anything over five pounds for a few days."

She hands me a paper slip. I turn the receipt over, expecting her number, something. She offers no explanation so I stuff it in my pocket and heft my pack. She starts to protest but I wave her off.

"It's fine," I say.

I walk through the door and am jerked back by a loose strap that snagged on the doorknob. I stumble into the unrestrained sun. My legs go limp. A bus stop catches my fall.

"Go home," a Hawaiian yells as he speeds by.

I wave.

Thoughts slow. Anxieties slip beneath the pleasures of a full stomach and a cool breeze. I climb onto the first bus and immediately fall asleep in the air conditioned shade, massaged by the diesel rumble. I'm nudged awake to relinquish my seat to an elderly local. I stand. Black pixels corrupt my vision. My stomach pulses. A dribble of vomit unspools from my puckered lips. The woman who nudged me to give up my seat, pushes me back. I'm a junky, sick for a fix. The bus stops and I get out, spitting cooling vomit into an overfilled trashcan in the parking lot of Ala Moana mall.

Inside, sedated Hawaiian music plays as a security guard escorts out a ragdoll of a man who's yelling about how he wasn't bothering no one. I assure myself that this treatment is reserved for unfashionable bums.

At the food court, my pride quickly defers to the first few waves of hunger. A petite teenager leaves a spill of fries on her tray. It's easier for me to reconcile eating the leftovers of the beautiful. I switch to her table and start in on the soggy fries until a shadow falls over my meal.

"Excuse me."

I swallow hard to choke down the mass of fries in my mouth. A slender woman with a short, pinstriped business skirt stands smiling down.

"Sorry to interrupt," she says, "but I just couldn't help noticing you over here. Do you happen to have any representation?"

"Representation?" I wasn't aware I needed representation to loiter.

"An agent."

"An agent?"

"A modeling agent?"

She slings her card across the table like a blackjack dealer. I'm the new heroin chic face of fashion, the ambassador of hobo-couture. Or maybe she represents alternative models who appear on pamphlets for welfare programs and homeless shelters.

"I'm not tall enough."

"I'm sure you've still got a few inches in you," she says with a wink. "I know these things. It's my job."

“Is this your cell number?”

“Yep. Just give me a call whenever. We’ll set you up right away with a photo shoot to build your portfolio. The teen model market is always starving for new faces.”

I was utterly hypnotized.

“Just have your parents or guardian give me a call when you get home. We’ll cut them a great deal on the portfolio pictures and posing classes.”

Maybe Anezka is wrong and my brooding expression, which I considered my seductive face until I met her, is attractive, or at least intriguing.

I watch the woman’s tiny ass wiggle uncomfortably away as her head bounces between tables, looking for other youths with dreams of fame to prey on. I use the card to swipe the salt and crumbs into a pile. Is this my lucky card? Is it worth staying on Oahu to stick out another hand? I flick the ivory colored card on the table, collect what little I have, and walk away.

* * *

The door to a WWII museum stands open. Brochures and flyers are stacked at the unmanned information desk. I set my pack down and lean on rails, reveling in the hum of air-conditioning. The reverence and solemn silence of history resonates off the dim corridors. Track lights illuminate perfectly preserved refuse and mass-produced artillery rounds that never realized their potential. I inhale the leathery, well-oiled air of small machine guns and musky uniforms of dainty, headless manikins. I’m the invisible photographer for Japanese families that smile in front of the heavy guns that defended Pearl Harbor. The past is not dead; it’s a fairytale we take photos in front of.

* * *

Two gutted rental cars guard a length of dirt disappearing in the brush. Behind these, a ranger leans on his truck, scribbling in his note pad.

“Trail’s closed,” he says without looking up. “Some girls died up there. Rock slide.”

“That right?”

“A geologist just went up the other day. Said the rocks will give again anytime.”

I nod but stay studying the projection of the trail into the mountains. He gazes at me a long time before I notice. He points me down the road to another trail through a public hunting ground. I follow the aim of his finger around the first bend, then push into the jungle several yards and sit listening for his truck.

Wet grass and burrs attack my shoes and socks as I slip on pine needles and pull myself up on skinny tree trunks. I don’t find a water fall or a mountain ridge. Instead, the trails I choose curve back down the mountain like all the dead end roads at the foot of the mountains. I run down with bent legs, then trip and tumble to a dirt stoop. I had hiked so hard in an effort not to waste time that this was in fact all I had accomplished. I sit on a bluff, huffing and puffing on my harmonica, breathing through the metal chords like a hyperventilating robot. This is my first attempt of the trip to emulate all those jolly tramps of black and white films, dressed in ripped suits, fedoras flapping open like the tops of canned food, and leather shoes with newspaper stuffed in their soles, who masterfully wail away their troubles on harmonicas.

The trail dumps me into a junkyard containing a collection of bathtubs filled with green slosh, sinks serving as plant pots, and crumpled busses. Although I never pass a gate, a high fence prevents my escape, and is the only sensible place to run when the guttural growl of a fast approaching dog powers through the clutter. I fall to the opposite side with a thwack. I can feel the pit bull's hot breath as he snarls and whines. I wish I wanted anything as much as he wants me.

* * *

I call Sam's crush, Michelle, on every pay phone I pass, let it ring four times, hang up, and hit the coin return tab. On the edge of Haleiwa, the host at Jameson's restaurant offers me the restaurant's cordless phone. I leave Michelle a message, saying I'll be there until sunset. I hold up in a booth eating dinner mints and making misshapen origami animals from the foil wrappers. The restaurant empties with the approaching night and the bartenders put paper cone cups upside down on the liquor bottles.

I duck into an organic food mart stocked with vegetables that cost more than my canned meals.

"Backpacking the world?" the dreadlocked clerk asks. Her capri pants sag beneath her bulbous vegetarian belly built on cheese and almond butter.

"Not the world."

She follows me down the aisles, smiling. At first I think she is compelled by my masculine musk, wanting me to rub coco butter on her belly, but she's just making sure I don't steal. I can't blame her.

* * *

Outside the BYU gym, where the receptionist refused me because I didn't have my BYU student ID, two Hawaiians pound leather drums. I sit beside them, nodding along. They invite me to watch them at the Cultural Centre for free. I'm to tell the ticket taker I know them. They even introduce me to one of their attractive Hawaiian daughters. I should try appreciating Hawaiian culture more often.

I explore the campus and end up in a line of college students waiting to buy the leftovers from the Polynesian Cultural Centre's nightly luau.

"I'm married too," says the lanky black man ahead of me, nodding to my dinky ring. "It's strange when you start wearing it. You can't pretend anymore."

"But it's good too. People assume you must be doing something right."

He spins his thin band around his skeleton fingers.

"How'd you end up here?" I ask.

"Just rolling with the punches. I'm having a kid. You?"

"Just hungry," I say, picking up two Styrofoam containers to fill with cold buffet food.

* * *

"One more day," I write on a postcard home. The phrase has become my meaningless Zen mantra, a calming ohmmmm. I mumble it like a lullaby for the road. The card pictures the same sunset before me, transforming the bay into a wishing well of copper eyes staring at their twilight counterparts. To the east the blanket of night has begun to spread. A mother stands on the water's edge, stretching a bright orange and red beach towel out like a net to catch her offspring bursting from the sea. I suck from the

impact wound of a coconut, spitting shell fragments as the warm juice dribbles down my chin, soaks into my shirt, and turns cold.

I write that when I return, I'll be Anezka's perfect man. I'll get a reasonable job. I'll go back to school. I'll take her out every night. I just need to stay out here a little longer, to assure myself there's no wonder in the world worth pursuing. I write that the American Dream is a ship docked in Honolulu, and I will buy it one day.

I tape strawberry guava seeds to the postcard stained with ink, dirt, and a dramatic swath of blood from trying to open the coconut. My postcards have become increasingly morbid and optimistic, with their long goodbyes and affirmations of my loving devotion—unabashed truth and lies. I have lost the ability to decipher between extremes.

A ukulele plays. I smile, hoping I'm finally going mad. An immense local stands a few paces behind me with only a sarong wrapped around his waist. A long, black braid of hair bounces on the ukulele. His blank face glows in the sunset as he strums and hums through expressionless lips. He's a Hawaiian demigod appointed to play the sun to bed. He's alone. Wild, shameful tears pour down my cheeks raised by a smile.

* * *

“Fucking Ali Baba motherfucker!”

The man on the adjacent picnic table spews a few minutes of antichristian, antigovernment, and generally anti-American babble before I realize his diatribe is directed at me and Sam's army cap. A siren screams up the highway.

“Here comes your God!”

I march toward him before I realize what I'm doing. I don't care if he's crazy. I'm going fucking crazy.

"It's just a goddamned hat!"

"An American hat."

"You're fucking American."

"No, I'm black."

His eyes whirl in their sockets. My jaw rattles. I want to feel his fist on my face and the warm, pulsing blood of a giving wound. He stuffs the clothes scattered on the table into his pack.

"You better not hit me," he says. "I'll call the cops. They know me."

"I bet they fucking know you, you fuck."

I have nothing to lose. Neither of us do. The difference is he's not willing to fight over that nothing. He walks back to the road. I've just affirmed all his criticisms of America's unchecked aggression. I start to understand this country's foreign policy, our need to be seen as impulsive and violent—crazy—to those who would threaten us.

Chapter Nineteen

Rain peppers the night. Flashlights and voices retreat to tents glowing like jack-o'-lanterns. I cross the campground to the windbreak of trees but am stopped by a knee-level flashlight that clicks on and blinds me.

“Who are you?” asks a boy.

“No one.”

“Don't you know you'll get wet out here?”

“I know it.”

“Don't you have no place to sleep?”

“Plenty of places, just not one place.”

The light clicks off.

“Are you a ghost?”

I chuckle, but the child remains silent. “I doubt it.”

He scurries away over the leaves.

I bed down beneath a squatty umbrella tree with large round leaves that reduce the drizzle to manageable drops. No sooner does my head settle on the pack than a flashlight begins retracing my steps into the trees. Running is an admission of guilt. I sit and wait.

“Hey,” a man shouts from behind the mask of light.

“Hey,” I say, head bowed, avoiding the direct light.

“My family is sleeping back here.”

I nod. Most men wouldn't have had the balls to chase off a drifter sleeping in the trees beside their families. He'll report me to the rangers if I stay, and if I leave for that matter. My arguing will only affirm his suspicions of me as the type of guy who is plotting to steal his food or watch his wife and son sleep.

His flashlight illuminates my way as I walk into the rain on the scalloped beach. He follows to the edge of the sand, then stands beneath the trees. I trust in the rain and dark to keep my pursuers at bay, at least until morning. His complaint will be filed along with the other sightings of me haunting the campgrounds. The rumors of me will have to be dealt with. I've officially been evicted from Malaekahana Park.

Chapter Twenty

A barefoot Hawaiian in khaki cargo shorts ties flowers and vines into a white wedding arch. His shirt rises over his belly with each reach and his free hand dangles at the wrist. I stuff my shirt in my pack and approach.

He's much larger up close, like a retired Sumo wrestler on a diet.

"What happens when those storm clouds blow in?" I ask.

The gelled black hair atop his square face stands defiant against the wind. The scent of body lotion and cologne overpower the flowers.

"All I'm paid to worry about are the flowers," he says with a slight Hawaiian accent buried beneath a lisp. "And a little rain is great for these lovelies."

I sit on one of the white benches. "I imagine Hawaii is the place to be if you work in weddings."

"Mainlanders just love beach weddings at sunset. Always at sunset."

"I hear even two men can get married here." He does not respond. "You must work nonstop."

"Already set up four weddings today. And this is the simplest one. The last bride had to have a carpet of gardenias, and I mean a carpet. You can't even order gardenias until June. Most brides are easy to talk out of their whimsies but she just wanted to be a diva. She boo-hooed about how when she was a little girl in Mississippi, she'd pretend to get married while holding wild gardenias. She had to have them. I didn't mind if she

wanted to pay, but it was just the worst tracking down a grower who could ship express in bulk. If she couldn't get married without gardenias, why not wait until the right month? Why not get married in Mississippi on your front porch? Why a beach? There aren't even beaches in Mississippi."

I don't bother correcting his mainland geography. He has plenty to say. The wedding business is booming, especially with second marriage couples flying to Hawaii for quick, intimate ceremonies away from their families. The only thing you need for beach weddings are benches and flowers, and he's absolutely the only supplier of both on the island, at least the right authentic ones.

"What brings you to Oahu?" he asks.

"I'm getting married."

"No you aren't. You're just a baby."

"Maybe you're right."

"So what are you doing here?"

"Not much. Seeing the sites. Meeting people. Sleeping around the island."

He studies me, the pack resting between my knees, then turns back to his work. "I could never do something like that, give up my down pillows and Egyptian sheets. Forget it."

"The sand can be pretty comfy sometimes."

"Not as cozy as my queen sized Memory Foam mattress it can't." His pruning slows as there are fewer and fewer stray leaves. "Where you staying now?"

"Wherever the day takes me. Malaekahana State Park probably."

“You know I’m going that way after I get done here. I could give you a ride if you want.”

The sun is near five and I don’t particularly have a reason to head back, but I doubt this is where he wants to take me.

* * *

Dwayne’s name is Pake, a Hawaiian slur for a Chinese person.

“I’m as mixed up as a can of Spam,” he says in reference to his heritage.

We fly down the highway in his white molester’s van: a long extended cab with no windows. A variety of sharp gardening implements, duct tape, and twine rattle in the interior. He points out celebrities’ houses where he provided flowers for parties—but it’s no big deal, really. And did he mention he did the flowers for the cast party of a famous TV show filmed on the island. He personally “leid” all the actors.

“You must get sick of mainlanders using that joke.”

“Oh no, I’m the one who tells it to them?” His attention shifts to a mansion sitting high on a ledge. “I’m doing a wedding there next week. That used to be the King’s house. You know Elvis right? Now it belongs to the family who owns all the Foodlands.”

These aren’t exactly the Hawaiian factoids I had hoped for to help season my postcards home, but I’m glad he likes me enough to give me the tour. I ask about the mountains forming a ridged spine through the heart of the island. He shrugs.

“Did I tell you about my adventures on the mainland?” Pake asks.

“No.”

His adventures consist primarily of coaching volleyball girls.

“You’d think the parents would be worried about me—and I’m a big guy—getting fresh with those 14-year-olds, but California is just so liberal, they were like, whatever.” He glances at me. “California exposed me to all kinds of things I wasn’t use to. Like the gays.”

“The gays?”

“They really weren’t as bad as I thought they’d be.”

“Is that right?”

“For the most part they were just like you and me. I met a ton of them on the beaches and at gardening conventions and things.”

“I used to live with three older guys like that. They loved gardening. In fact, my great, great grandfather was a gardener for some German duke. But he had to run off when he slapped the duke’s daughter for coming on to him.”

Pake glances between me and the road. “So what was that like, living with older men I mean?”

“They were like step-fathers, step-fathers who wanted to fuck me, but I guess that’s common.”

Pake couldn’t keep his eyes on the road. I gripped my pack, preparing for him to kick me out for being too blunt, or for him to whip out his “Spam” and brutalize me for glancing at it.

“There aren’t any on the island,” he says.

“What? The gays?”

“That’s why I was surprised in California. They’re pretty nice.”

I focus on the blurred landscape.

“We have *Mahus* though.” Pake laughs in a tone much higher than his thick neck seems capable.

“Is that like a gay fish?”

“No. *Mahus*. You know. *Mahus*.” He dangles his wrist either in imitation or out of habit. “Lady boys.”

I know how to manage openly gay men from my experience with women who use me for sexless companionship, but I have no idea how to hustle whatever Pake is.

“I’m going to show you a secret spot my father took me as a boy,” Pake announces, pulling off on a dirt road that disappears beneath a canopy of trees.

Is he hoping to get me alone in a quiet, romantic setting? Will he sacrifice me in an ancient *Mahus* burial ground? Why else would Pake mention that he also does funereal arrangements? When we get out, I take my pack with me.

“Why you need that?”

“Habit. Never know when I’ll need something from it.”

He smiles, perhaps thinking the pack contains such handy utensils as hand lotion and condoms. I consider sprinting into the woods, but Pake’s tree trunk thighs look built for running down fleeing boys in quick bursts.

The secret trail is dotted with hoof prints and horse droppings from guided tours. Dirt gives way to sand that spreads and slips into a tranquil bay too heavily shaded for sun worshiping tourists. We sit on a log in front of embers. Pake’s father used to be a

plantation boss there long before Turtle Bay Resort was built—an immense resort that now towers over the tree line.

“You have to watch out if you come here at night. The Mormon boys go wild here. I’ve seen them here doing crazy things.”

“What kind of things?”

“They can’t have sex before they’re married, so they come here and get wild.”

“I guess the more you suppress, the greater your chances of exploding.”

* * *

“You want to go to a cockfight?” Pake asks, pulling back onto the highway. “It’s one of my hobbies.”

For as much time as he spent trying to convince me that gay men are just like us, I’m surprised he feels no need to justify this hobby.

“Sounds good.”

He takes a sharp turn down a farm road. The rattling of tools in the van intensifies as the road degrades. Parked cars multiply along the thick growth of the shoulder. What looks like a makeshift carnival gathers around a plywood concession stand. Barefoot children push popcorn, pulled pork, and beer. Men huddle around trucks, drunk, yelling to Pake and elbowing their pals about my presence.

“If anyone gives you trouble, just say that Pake brought you.”

“You sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. They might call you haole, but just nod and smile.”

“What does that even mean? Haole.”

He collects a small bag of tools. His voice is no longer effeminate, but distinctly Hawaiian, speaking in aggressive pidgin, as he carries himself toward the crowd with the swagger of the bully man he is. “Like whitey or foreigner, yeah.”

“Why is that a bad thing?”

“Like nigger for whites.”

I try to bring my pack but Pake insists I leave it. A backpack will just make me stick out even more. I concede but slip my flip blade in my pocket, and follow Pake into the crowd with head bowed. Bare feet caked with mud, sand, and hard white calluses shuffle through the packed dirt. Elderly men sit in folding chairs, drinking and squinting. Younger men in designer shirts throw craps with weathered fishermen in torn-off slacks and broken-billed caps. All are Hawaiian and in some way related to Pake. Some greet him, but none say a word to or about me. Pockets of men stare at me from behind blackout shades. Others whisper to friends then nod toward me. Perhaps I’m just paranoid, or maybe it’s Pake’s job to lure in sacrificial white boys with his nonthreatening lisp, flowers, and promises of revealing the island’s secrets.

The crowd swells around a pit the size of a boxing ring boarded off with warped plywood. Coolers and cages are scattered around trucks and cheering locals. A cock named Young Boy struggles to be released again from the hands of a kid whose shirt is smudged with bloody handprints. Luis, a short, sturdy man in a skullcap handles a bird named Paul.

“You bet based on the handler,” Pake says.

The birds burst toward each other, clawing the air, fighting to come down atop each other. They hit the ground in a tangle of burnt red and oil black feathers flailing in the dust. The crowd cheers. The handlers separate the cocks and set them loose again. In a daze, the birds step on their own spurs.

After several exchanges, as if by accident, Young Boy's spur sinks into Paul, but the bird won't quit. The match can't end until one is dead. Luis plucks Paul's feathers and pinches his beak, but each time he sets Paul in the ring he collapses like a nesting hen. But Young Boy is hurt and through fighting. He struts in circles like a tricycle with a missing wheel. The kid prevents Young Boy's retreat, shouting and clapping at the bird until it stumbles on Paul with his awkward blade, triggering Paul's beak to fall into Young Boy. After each exchange, Luis inflates Paul like a bag pipe and pinches his beak. To test to make sure both animals are still alive, the handlers expose their chicken's neck to the other. As long as the opposing rooster snaps at the neck, it's still alive. For as dead as Paul is, he keeps trying to peck Young Boy's neck. The bout ends in a draw. A barefoot boy rakes the feathers and turns over the bloody earth.

A small man with no teeth stands at the weight table, holding a nervous rooster that looks healthier than the man. He caught the bird in the jungle in hopes someone will spot him the three hundred dollars for an initial bet. Pake's uncle shoves the man aside to make room for his bulldog of a rooster.

"He's from Texas," Pake says by way of introducing me to his uncle. "Only steers and queers come from Texas," Pake says in a lisp infused imitation of a southern drawl that sounds like he's making fun of the mentally handicapped. Pake's uncle quickly loses

interest in me after finding out that I don't know the man in Texas who sells him cockfighting spurs.

Waiting for a match, Pake introduces me to his friend, a game warden. The two explain how the local police never interfere with their fights. It's the feds that cause all the problems.

"They can't stop cockfights," the game warden says. "It's our heritage."

At first the argument makes sense, until I consider the genocidal tendencies of my own heritage as a white American of German descent.

When the cock is paired with a suitable opponent, we retreat to Pake's uncle's truck, where Pake holds open the rooster's beak to force down doping drops. Pake then cradles the cock to his chest like a baby, stroking it, as his uncle attaches the spur. The blade is fixed to a leather band that is hooked around the nub where the bird's true spur was amputated. The leather is fastened with twine then medical tape.

In the pit, Pake lets the cock strut a few feet then jerks it back by the tail, allowing the bird to get used to the spur and so gamblers can size him up.

"Even, even," everyone shouts, crowding around and pressing me into the plywood ring.

The handlers expose the birds' necks for the opposing rooster to peck. The plastic guards are removed from the spurs and the roosters are positioned on the ground. During the release, the handlers give the birds a slight lift. The roosters rise toward each other, clawing the air, provoking cheers with each burst. Dust and feathers cloud the light through the trees.

“What you doing here, haole?” The musk of warm beer breath powders my cheek.

The man pokes my ribs and repeats himself. Pake’s cock falls atop the other, and keeps clawing at the bird snagged beneath its talons. I throw my arm up, cheering with half the crowd. My right clutches the blade in my pocket. The birds are separated. Blood drizzle down from the spur of Pake’s bird, staining the other’s white feathers around a generous wound.

“What you doing here?” His sporadic facial hair grazes my jaw.

The handlers release the birds.

“I’m here with Pake.”

“Who?”

The handlers expose their birds’ necks. Luis works his cock like a puppet, but the rooster’s neck hangs lifeless. I cheer. Pake smiles at me then casts a stony gaze at my new companion. I feel the man cower away, melting into the crowd. Outside the ring, it’s easy to forget just how imposing of a man Pake is.

I stand with my back to the truck as Pake shows me a deep wound in his chicken’s chest. He snaps the bird’s neck and untangles the spur from its leg while the bundle of feathers dangles upside down like a wet umbrella. He stuffs his portion of the winnings into his cargo pants and puts an arm around my shoulder as he leads me back to the van. He is feeling generous and offers to take me out for a traditional Hawaiian meal.

We drive to a place called Papa Ole’s Kitchen, crammed in an empty Hauula strip mall. He orders for me, assuming I must love beef. My Hawaiian steak is hamburger patty over rice, soaked in gravy. I clean my plate before Pake finishes half of his meal.

“How was it?”

“Unbelievable.”

Pake’s delicate bites are interspersed with more stories of his mainland adventures: tales of getting lost on a subway and meeting some famous Broadway singer.

“Unbelievable.”

Even though he never went to school to become a florist, the elements of design come naturally to him, like breeding good fighting chickens. His grandmother spotted his early talent for noticing details. She left Pake her floral business in her will.

“Unbelievable.”

But, for as much as he loves his work, he wishes he could be like me, be free to travel wherever he wants and meet all kinds of people. He loved all the people in LA. He liked being able to disappear. But, his responsibilities are here, with his family and the business.

“Traveling is overrated,” I say, chewing a toothpick and spitting the splinters.

“Everyone and everywhere is basically the same. It’s mostly a lot of waiting, like anything else I guess.”

Did Pake already tell me that on another of his mainland adventures, he packed fifteen sandwiches for a day long train ride then ate all fifteen in the first hour because he was so bored?

“Unbelievable.”

Belting out a laugh loud enough for a stage performance, Pake squeezes my wrist, then recoils, tamping his lips with a napkin.

“I’m glad you have a girlfriend back home,” he says. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

* * *

“What you doing now?” Pake yells through the open window as I stand at the back entrance of Malaekahana campground.

“Sleeping.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Leaving.”

“I was going to offer to take you around the island. Show you some of the secret romantic spots you can take your girlfriend when you get married here.”

“Too bad I already got my ticket,” I say. “Well, it was real great meeting you.”

The van pulls away then veers off into the grass beside the chained entrance. I consider running.

“I have to use the bathroom too,” Pake says as he springs out of the van.

The line between lonely and deranged is blurred. I can’t tell him I am not interested in him if he keeps pretending he’s straight.

Moonlight pours through the roofless changing room on the open cement floor that slopes toward a single drain. Benches line the cinderblock walls. The florescent tubes flicker as insects ping and sputter against the glass. The pipes hiss. The place looks like an abandoned jail cell lit for a horror scene. Pake waits for me to choose a urinal then stands at the one beside me. His hairless legs graze mine as our urine sizzles on the porcelain.

“So what was it like living with three older gays?”

My former landlords might have grabbed my ass or made the occasional joke involving my cock and their mouth, but they never tried to piss beside me. I only told Pake that anecdote so he wouldn't feel like he had to pretend. Obviously he took it to mean that, like him, I'm open to having sex with other heterosexual men in public bathrooms. It's impossible to respond in a way that can't be interpreted as a cryptic admission about my promiscuity.

“It was good. They were nice, quiet dudes.”

“I met a lot of nice guys in LA. They're all so nice, and quiet.”

I try again to part ways at the exit.

“Let me show you the beach,” he says.

While I'm happy to oblige some over the table flirting in exchange for dinner, this is getting frightening. I study his pants, trying to detect a sharp gardening tool stowed in his cargo shorts. He catches my gaze and grins.

Pake walks behind me, pointing out patches of sand where I can sleep. I sit on the beach within range of a bonfire ablaze with laughter and silhouettes of girls in motion. He lies unusually close, posing on his side with his leg up, in imitation of an overweight underwear model.

“It's cold,” he says, shivering. “How do you stay warm?”

“I don't,” I say, then reconsider before he invites me to stay with him. “I have coats. I put socks on my hands.”

“What do you do for fun?”

“When I sleep?”

“No. Anytime.”

“I don’t know. I enjoy spending time with my girlfriend. We watch bad reality dating shows.”

“Is it love?”

“Sure.”

After twenty minutes, a silence falls, at which time in the date he’s expected to make his move or leave. I almost want him to attempt a kiss so I can shut him down, but I’m losing patience. He reclines, staring at the stars, and describes LA, naming all the celebrities who live there and who they’ve dated.

“Well,” I say. “I guess I’ll go to the bathroom and get ready for the night.”

“I’ll just sit here. You can leave your pack if you want.”

“Thanks, but everything I need is in there: toiletries, night clothes.” I walk into the trees.

“I don’t know how you do it,” he says.

“Do what?”

“Don’t you get lonely?”

He is lying on his side, bare legs laced over each other and a hand propping up his head as he stares out to sea, toward California.

“I like being alone, sometimes. It’s good for you. Helps you see who’s left when no one is left.”

“But you must have been having problems with her for you to come out here?”

I consider this. “My problem was that if I didn’t leave, I’d always wonder what it was like to leave.”

Hiding in a stall, I hear Pake’s heavy steps and the slap of his designer sandals on the concrete. I consider pulling up my feet, but he would just check the lockless stalls. I wait for him to speak, to announce that he’s leaving, but he just stands there. The glint of his eyes moves across the door crack. At this moment in a horror film, the suspenseful whine of violins would stop, leaving only the sound of my heavy breaths silenced with a burst of an axe splitting the door. A dark stain of water pools around his feet. It trickles into the drain.

When I emerge, Pake stands sopping wet.

“I rinsed off in the shower,” he explains, his wet shirt draped over his shoulder.

“Oh.”

He takes my place in the same stall. I stand at the sink, flossing—even the threat of rape is no excuse for ignoring dental hygiene. A slow rocking sound rises from the stall. Is he rubbing one out? I lean closer. A barrage of squealing shit splatters the toilet, emitting a violent after burn of fumes.

“Let me give you my sister’s number on the mainland before I leave,” Pake’s voice says as I quietly slip out of the bathroom.

* * *

I walk past the line of seaside mansions to another beach park down the coast which lacks rangers. My shirt clings to me like a wetsuit. I bury myself in sand to steady my shivering. My glasses hopelessly blur with rain and body heat. I shake uncontrollably

through the night, perpetually checking my watch, counting the minutes in held breaths. I imagine myself in Pake's bed, his giant body atop mine, keeping me warm and still. The rain comes harder than I've ever felt, but there is nowhere left to go.

Chapter Twenty-One

A flicker wakes me. Headlights soundlessly bound over the packed sand groomed by the shore. I dart for the tree line and dive over a rental property's shrub. Only in these moments, waking up on the run, do I feel justified in forgoing a campfire or sleeping bag. Comfort stifles escape.

The headlights become flashlights. An older couple combs the beach for complete shells delivered by the night tide.

My pulse refuses to relax.

* * *

Dawn leaks through the trees as I pound out pushups on the boulder. I'm an extra in a new age workout video that is as much about the ambiance, the repetitive nature sounds and the pure horizon, as the concentrated breathing and slow motion exercises. I'm the face of a new workout craze: hobo-aerobics. Health enthusiasts will sprint from security guards, climb fences, and swim across streams while holding twenty-five pound rucksacks over their heads. The series will train viewers for wilderness excursions and mountain climbing expeditions they'll never go on.

* * *

Models stand aside the road in peach and raspberry colored bikinis and matching heels, thumbing rides as a camera man and his silver, reflective umbrella color these women with pulses of light. I walk by on the shoulder. The photographer yells, "Cut!"

* * *

On the bus, I sleep face first on my pack. I'm a public service announcement.

The driver kicks me off at the airport. I take it as a sign.

A screen blinks with departures and arrivals. For a moment, I remember I'm free to fly anywhere, so long as my emergency travel funds hold out. Last minute deals are surely available for flights to LA, Canada, and Mexico. A cocktail of hope and despair sits uneasy in my gut. This is probably the first and only time in my life I'll feel free to go, or do, anything I want, and yet there's only one place I really want to be—the one place I can't go, not yet.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Fractured gems of green beer bottles litter the rocky shore. Eviscerated and sun-bleached crab shells perch on boulders, waiting to be crunched underfoot like confetti eggs. Webs of fishing nets and seaweed stretch between rocks. Gutted Japanese and American vans cramped with soggy textiles slouch beneath the overhanging jungle. Vines drip over their discolored roofs. Palm tree benches and van seats circle a mound of wet ash caked over empty tin cans. Piles of glass and crushed plastic containers collect in the sand like the ruins of rodent pyramids built to transient gods. A doormat lies half buried in the red mud with flowering weeds sprouting through the faded greeting: “Kauai, The Garden Isle.” This epigraph is a recent creation. Kauai’s true meaning was lost long ago with the various cultures that came and went. Some locals like to remind outsiders that this island has never been conquered, as though Kauaians inherently possess an indomitable spirit. But, it is the island itself that is unvanquished.

The Polynesian Marquesans were the first to claim Kauai, arriving around 400 AD with new crops and livestock and hopes of recreating their homeland. Six hundred years later, they were defeated and enslaved by the Tahitians. The first European, Captain Cook, arrived in 1778 and was mistaken for Lono, the god of peace and agriculture. With Cook came modern warfare and diseases like cholera, measles, and gonorrhea. These cut the Polynesian population in half. King Kamehameha used western weapons to defeat all of the islands except Kauai and the forbidden sister island, Ni‘ihau. His invasion was

stalled by a storm and then an epidemic until Kauai's ruler, Kaumualii, died in 1824, abdicating the land to Kamehameha II. This new king ordered the end of Hawaiian religion as well as the destruction of Hawaiian temples, or heiaus, which now exist as rock piles along the roadsides. He also approved the purchase of property by foreigners, clearing the way for missions and plantations. In 1893, when outsiders owned ninety percent of Hawaii, American landowners overthrew Queen Liliuokalani, propelling the island chain toward its present role as a vacation state. Of the fewer than 70,000 current Kauaians, around thirty-six percent are white and thirty-one percent are Asian. Anywhere from one quarter to one third of people on the island each day are tourists. In this sense, I am a local.

Like a crow's nest elevated on the mast of a shipwreck, a makeshift ladder leans on a palm, providing a lookout. Are the occupants hiding in the trees, watching me, or am I just the latest castaway to wander down the shore and inherit this prospector's paradise?

Identical visitors maps titled, "Eden on Earth," are stacked beside the fire pit for kindling. I unfold one. It lists popular monuments and sights along the main highway but gives no hint of where the next fresh water source is. I tighten my pack's straps and continue down the beach. The dark lumps dotting the white sand are never coconuts, but half-buried refuse—relics of a throw-away culture. If this is Eden, this is Eden after the fall. The new cradle of civilization is beyond these shores—a continent of buoyant plastic trash twice the size of Texas—rocking in the watery wasteland. Each day this Pacific Garbage Patch grows, cracks its plastic joints, clears its glinting gaze, and stretches its spindly fingers toward these sandy shores. Eventually, our restless need for more, to

explore, overcome, and consume, will overwhelm even us and exhaust all the spoils of our conquests.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cars rattle over the bridge, hugging the rail. Below, a muddy river pushes through foliage and fences hanging over the banks. A sturdy Asian woman pushes her clunky bicycle up the road. She adjusts the thick glasses slipping down her broad nose.

“Is it okay to cross here?” I ask, practicing my smile.

“Is it okay? It’s okay.”

I follow her lead. On the bridge, her feet constantly step on the wrong side of the white line, protecting her bike with her body. On the other side, we walk side-by-side, talking. Lee moved here seven years ago from Japan. She doesn’t have the language to explain why. All she’s capable of talking about is how she’ll never be able to afford a house. Even the homes in her neighborhood, which she says is overrun with Filipino junkies who live with their parents, start at half a million.

She turns down a side road. I remain on the corner, waving.

“You come?” she says. “Yes. You come.”

We walk down the street to the backyard of her duplex.

“I want to move to the mainland,” Lee says by way of apologizing for her neighbor’s sacks of cans on the porch waiting to be recycled for beer money. She uses the key hanging from a string around her neck like a cross to turn multiple locks. “I want to go, but can’t. They’ll take Mojo.”

On the kitchen counter stands the fluffiest rooster I've ever seen, puffing his feathers and clucking. She cradles Mojo and smooths his shiny red, black and green feathers. The walls are covered with portraits of Mojo in a mix between rudimentary Japanimation and finger painting. Scat, or "dynamites," as she calls them, dot every surface. Lee spills chicken scratch on the counter. Mojo pecks furiously, tossing kernels in the air.

She sets a cup of grapefruit juice between the bird and me.

"Is that for him or me?"

"You," she grins.

When I grab the glass, Mojo pecks at my grungy ring, drawing blood.

"He's mad," she says. "You first boy here."

Lee beckons me to sit on her futon couch while she produces a file folder full of tourist maps and bus schedules. She leans over me, explaining the importance of each before handing them over. She draws a map of where to get a bus pass and writes out exactly what to tell the clerk.

"I look Hawaiian so I'm okay, but you must go north." She circles the north side of the island with her finger. "This is the haoles."

Lee circles spots along the map where I can get water or use the bathroom for free. Running out of papers, she paces around the apartment, straightening furniture and asking me about the mainland

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," she answers in a slow rhythmic voice no matter what I say.

Then she sits right beside me and flips through a photo album of her Mojo artwork. A breeze fills the shaded room, providing a chorus for her understated explanations of her art.

“This is Mojo and flowers. I like Mojo and flowers.”

I’m hypnotized. Her warmth is familiar. I want to rest my head on her shoulder and sleep for ages. I’d probably wake wearing her pink slippers and wrapped in her comforter with warm tea waiting on the coffee table and Mojo ready to peck my eyeballs out.

At the end of Lee’s collection, I force myself up and thank her profusely.

“Wait,” she says, holding up her hands.

She rummages through her pantry then her refrigerator and retrieves a giant Hershey’s chocolate bar. “You need it,” she says thrusting it at me. “You keep strong.”

I can’t blame her for mistaking me for a poor, lost soul.

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine. Really.”

“No. You starve,” she says. “Here.”

She wants to give me more, show me where to go, to come with me, but I must leave before I take too much.

Halfway up the street I turn. Lee stands in the middle of the road. I wave. She stares, arms limp at her sides, unsure whether to run after me, or go back inside.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A crumpled truck stalls outside of a gas station. A local with a storm of white hair and broken teeth nods when I ask if he needs help. I push the truck a quarter mile while he attempts to pop the clutch. He stomps the break and waves me forward. If I give him one last push, he'll just coast down a side street to his buddy's house. I nod. He tells me he's nice but to watch out for his Hawaiian friends.

"I know" I say. "Y'all don't like white guys."

His expression hardens. "Right. We don't like fucking whites."

I leave him strapped in his broken truck, waiting for the street's gradual slope to tow him down the road.

Three teenage girls wearing clothes that are beyond their years, yet still too tight, stand opposite me on the road, hitchhiking. I give them a goofy grin.

"Hey!" one says.

I turn back. Two giggle while the third waves. They're probably making fun of me but I don't care. I walk backwards for a time, thrusting my thumb out and smiling at the passing cars. The only result is a few angry shouts. No matter. I can cover distance on the island map as fast as I can cross the same space by car on a Texas map.

I follow a sign down a long side street to a resort where I hide my pack beneath a pool chair, remove all but my board shorts, and shower beneath the open air faucet, letting the red dirt swirl around the sandy drain. Then, I recline in the sun to bake. No

server asks what I'll have. A security guard in an imitation police uniform waddles toward me. A smile spreads beneath my army cap. He nods and continues on. I may not blend in on the streets, but with a smile, I can pass for an eccentric hotel guest.

I call home to wish my mother a happy Mother's Day. Both parents get on the line to hear about my adventures. As is our custom, they ask simple questions and I provide concise answers.

"Where are you?"

"A resort."

"You aren't staying there are you?"

"No, just using their pool and helping myself to their complementary coffee."

"Great," my father says, chuckling then blowing his nose in his handkerchief.

"So, you need any money. No, you never need money do you? If we sent you some, you'd probably just stuff it in your savings like you used to do with your lunch money."

"Yep."

"Good," he says. "So everything is good."

"Yep."

"Seen any good movies?"

For my father, movies are cultural events. Like me, he discusses life in terms of movies, and has the sometimes flattering habit of comparing people to movie stars.

Today I'm Brad Pitt's nomadic character Tristan from *Legends of the Fall*. Back home, I would have secretly reveled in this comparison. Here, I feel like an actor must when admirers confuse him with the characters he plays.

Lazy sunlight streams through the lacey lobby curtains, spotlighting the clouds of dust flouncing through the vacant lounge. Outside, a few birds chirp of the coming dusk.

“I should probably go,” I say. “I have to find a place to be for the night.”

“Good,” my father says. “Check back with the resort in the morning. They’re bound to have a continental breakfast. It won’t be stealing because they dump most of it anyhow. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I trounce three miles down the highway chewing on a tremendous blade of grass to fit my vision of Huckleberry Finn and to keep my teeth from grinding. The road is littered with flattened and cured Cane toad carcasses. I kick them, sending the hides scraping across the asphalt and pinwheeling into the brush.

At Lydgate State Park, a troop of hippies occupy a gazebo, eating, blowing smoke, and beating drums. I station myself at an adjacent stone chess table, reading, looking over from time to time, smiling. A middle aged woman approaches. Dark nipples press through her dingy white tank top and her brown, sun-fried hair matches the understated patches of her armpit hair.

“Here,” she says, offering me a flower from a wooden bowl full of them.

“Thanks,” I say, smelling it then studying the folds.

She laughs like an unabashed maniac.

“What?”

“Eat it,” she says grinning. Her teeth are offset and gray.

I think of Odysseus on the island of the lotus eaters. I imagine this is some hallucinogen that will send me running mad around the island, chasing visions of the woman I left behind. Still, this would be about the same as my reality, though perhaps shrouded in a fuzzy halo. I chomp the flower.

Catherine introduces herself by telling me about her six children, four of whom she birthed in the ocean.

“Wow.”

“I’m blessed.” She belts out another crazed laugh. “Very blessed.”

I join the grubby troop where my main distinction is my serious lack of secondary hair and hemp jewelry. Everyone has at least one article of clothing missing to showcase deep tans. Adults on drugs and children on organic sugar highs color and paint a table covered in butcher paper. Three tins of organic and vegetarian food are picked over by flies. A jug of cheap wine circulates. A tall, lanky Russian named Ivan with black kinky hair mixes reggae-infused techno beats on his laptop while a middle-aged tech hippie named Jeff projects blurred pictures from the last Burning Man Festival onto a stained bed sheet undulating in the breeze. Leaf explains the various uses of hemp: jewelry, rope, tampons... I smile at everyone and nod along to every idea about eternal souls and shared consciousnesses while I slurp soggy vegetables at the kids’ table. I’m immediately adopted by two of Catherine’s children: a preteen surfer boy named Makaio and a blonde ten-year-old girl named Shalyn. Catherine sips from a bottle concealed in a brown bag as she cheers for her youngest son Copper, who runs naked through pools of acrylic paint on the table, then circles the concrete until his feet loose color. For as loopy as Catherine

seems, she must have done something right to have raised these children. I prefer their schoolyard chats about what sports they play to the adult lectures on the necessity of organic food as they roll “natural” cigarettes. We paint bushes of fire until we’re speckled with acrylic blips and the chaos of bright colors consumes the entire page in a muddy mess.

“Perfect,” Shalyn says, and I have to agree.

I excuse myself to finish the last of the food.

“Weren’t you the one at the resort today?” asks a large Hawaiian with hair halfway down his broad, fleshy back.

“Which resort?”

“We was wondering who this backpacker was, lounging poolside like he owned the place.” His glossy eyes rest on my pack.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. We thought it was funny.”

“You work there?”

“I’m the entertainment,” he says. “I play drums for the luau. That’s where the leftovers came from. No one eats the vegetables.”

His smile is so expansive it’s hard for me to believe it’s genuine, or at least not boosted by drugs. I’m not used to people, especially Hawaiians, being this nice. Perhaps I’m just worried he’ll find out that I’m not as prolific a traveler as I pretend to be. I say it’s getting late. I should find a place to sleep.

He nods. “See you on the North Shore.”

“The North Shore?”

“Yeah. Secret’s Beach.”

“Secret’s? How will I find it?”

“It’s not that secret,” he says, “at least for the people who know, you know?” His glassy eyes gaze into what he must assume is my soul.

“If I ask someone they should know?”

I can almost see him lose his train of thought.

“My name’s Ben,” he says. “But friends call me Bull.”

He extends his hand. Bull is the first person to ask my name on Kauai. I’m undecided who I want to be. This group has been so hospitable and genuine, at least in their ingeniousness, accepting whatever it is I’m pretending to be. But, I want a cool identity like them. I want to name myself. I want to be a Bull or a Copper.

“Percy.” I say. “I’m Percy Mercury.”

* * *

The beach bathroom light drenches me in a puddle of yellow. I gargle with what I realize too late is reclaimed water. The taste magnifies the vegetables that I repeatedly belch.

A teetering local has trouble with the bathroom door.

“What you doing?” he asks me when the bathroom door falls from his grip.

“Brushing my teeth.”

He glares at me a moment, then looks over his shoulder to a cluster of shadows roaring aside a grill.

“Why you here?”

“What?”

“You looking for ice?”

“Y’all have ice machines at beach parks?”

“You want to suck my dick for some rock? Is that what you want?”

I grab my pack and head off. He slams a full beer on the cement, the beer pulsing out. He stumbles back the way he came, drunkenly calling his friends.

The sidewalk on the outer rim of the park is divided by two rows of thick, squatty pines that buffer the condos from the elements. I dash into the cover in the dark between street lamps and hunch on a bed of pine needles, gripping my knife. I should have waited before switching my contacts for my outdated glasses. Westerns never discuss what happens to desperados who can’t see their rifle sights. In a scuffle, glasses are the first thing to break, leaving you to track phantoms. As a boy my mother rarely got angry with my brother and me for fighting, but often for fighting before removing our glasses. The only benefit of this training was that I learned to read bodies instead of threats.

A group of locals pass, boasting in pidgin about beating someone’s ass. Did they really think it would take all of them? They circle back on the opposing sidewalk. For a long time I sit, listening then I wake hunched over my pack. Silence. I recline on the mattress of pine needles, in the warm den shielded from wind and rain. I give up the grip on my knife and tuck my hands between my thighs.

* * *

Downtown Kapa'a offers a collection of hipster boutiques, surf shops, a library, southern BBQ, and Mexican food. I pass over a hostel for an open air coffee shop. My hair is puffy and disheveled, a sloppy imitation of James Dean's. I smile excessively at the barista as she brews a new pot. She slings me a cookie for free. I ask about a job. She slides me an application and leans over the counter to watch me complete it.

"Where you from?" she says as I hesitate over my name.

"Texas."

"I'm sorry," she says, with a smirk.

I look up. Hungry and worn, it's impossible to hide the flashes of rage that color my expression.

"I'm sorry," she says again.

"It's fine." I roll her pen across the counter and leave.

Down the road I duck into another resort. A pitchman expounds on the glories of timeshares to a small crowd that watches me push through. I crack open a can of pork and beans by the pool and spoon the cold mush as my feet soak in the hot tub. A manager turns down the voices on his walky talky to interact with me.

"How we doing today sir?"

"Great."

"Can we help you with anything?"

I consider my beans. "You have Lone Star?"

"Lone Star?"

"Yeah," I say. "A very upscale beer. I'm surprised you've never heard of it."

“I don’t think we do.”

I wave him off with the truncated spoon attached to a keychain of other sawed-off utensils. “I’m fine. Thanks anyways.”

His lips move without forming words. I wave goodbye until he leaves.

* * *

Nursery rhymes rumble in my throat as I walk against traffic, chewing a blade of grass. I follow the beach back south, only to be separated from Lydgate Park by the mouth of the Wailua River. Impatient to walk back to the road, I wade into the water with shoes on and pack over my head. The water rises with each step until I’m sinking in the breadth of the current churned by the backwash of waves and the river’s push. I kick with my head below and my arms above. I rise to take huge gulps, then sink back, kicking and kicking until my feet find sand.

On the opposing shore a Hawaiian girl with a flower in her hair prays in Hawaiian beside two kneeling blonde boys. Between them a gecko twitches on its back, unable to survive their play.

* * *

A hen and a rooster roost in the pine tree beside my head. The clapping beats of a luau and the smell of cooked pork stews my senses. A Cane toad bellows and another creature rummages through the roughage. Footsteps crunch in the gravel, pause, and backtrack. Golf carts buzz by.

I dream of calling a phone sex operator and Anezka answers.

I fling two finger-sized slugs from my exposed ankles and lie back, breathing heavy. The scrub of trees extends over me, threading the stars. The jungle stinks of decay and rebirth—the stench of unstoppable growth sprouting between asphalt cracks. This same force gnaws on me. Its dewy saliva coats me each morning, and its army of insects carry me away, bit by bit. I'm alive with the encroaching wild, with every sensation but that of a warm body beside me. I imagine Anezka beside me, lying so still for so long that the growth wiggles between our fingers, through our ribs, separating and intertwining us like rose and thorn bushes of fated lovers in forgotten fairytales.

* * *

A man with a dark wood tan sits a foot from me on the picnic table, staring at the waves. Empty picnic tables and scrounging ibises surround us. Does he think I'm a hustler, advertising for anonymous sex in a public park? Can I blame him?

Another man joins us. He winces each time he slurps from his mammoth thermos.

“Are we displacing you?” His steaming drink fogs his shooting range glasses.

“No.”

“We're having a meeting.”

I nod.

“You're more than welcome to join us.”

“Y'all have free drinks?” I say, forgetting to smile.

“Coffee.” He lifts his mug. “It's actually an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.”

I sit, picking at my calluses.

“It’s not just for people with alcohol problems you know.” He smooths his sweeps of white hair. “Helps with all kinds of things. Helps you admit what needs admitting.”

I pull my shirt on.

“Helps you start down that road to change.” Wrinkles fracture around his eyes as he sips. The other man nods with the waves. A woman in dark shades crosses the grass, perpetually sucking the straw of a large fast food drink.

“Everyone has things they need to change. I’m sure you have things, even little things. This group helps with that. We have a system. It’s essential to have a plan.”

I nod, gripping my pack.

“You don’t have nothing you wish you could change?”

I nod. “I just don’t know what it is yet.”

* * *

Anahola Mountains revolve as I hike around the gradual bend of Kuhio highway. Blues pours out the open window of a farm house. Modest collections of livestock watch me while chewing their cud. Fruit trees form piles of rotten produce. I punt spoiled mangos and leap the diversity of dead road-kill cooking in the drainage ditch.

I rest on the shaded benches at an isolated smoothie shack called The Fruit Farm. The place is constructed out of little more than treated plywood and a metal screen that wraps around the kitchen. I had been walking since nine in the morning. The corkboard flyer board has no listings for jobs. I rip off the slips for organic produce, assuming these places are in need of organic laborers.

“You know where the next pay phone is?” I ask the thick new-age woman with long dark dreadlocks who smokes behind the screened-in kitchen.

“People still use payphones,” she says with a lisp salted by cigarettes. “Kilauea maybe.”

“How far?”

“I don’t know. Maybe six miles.”

It’s thirty minutes past the time I promised to call Anezka.

I run aside the highway, blinded by the sun. I run, pulling the straps tighter to keep the weight from pounding my lower back. I run against traffic through deep vegetation, with thorns and burs ripping my legs. From the mile markers, I make my first mile in under seven minutes, but I can’t maintain this pace with the pack.

Pouring sweat, I bang on the glass of Kilauea’s first commercial shop—another smoothie shack. The worker points me half a mile down the road to a paint store in the corner of a noisy intersection.

Anezka doesn’t answer.

I sit waiting for two other men who pull up in cars to use the phone.

She answers the third time I try. The traffic and wind make it nearly impossible to distinguish her words from her pauses. I’m distracted by her side conversation with a passenger about where they’re going.

“I miss you. You have no idea how much I miss you,” I repeat this mantra as if the words will gain significance with reiteration.

“What do you miss?”

“I miss winters with you, feeling invincible packed into stuffed jackets, falling asleep with your head on my shoulder in the back of cars. I miss taking your comforter to the park early Sunday mornings just to fall asleep in the cool morning sun and stuff ourselves on cheese and crackers.”

“How is Kauai?”

“I’ve decided it will be beautiful.”

“You have, have you?”

“I’m smiling a lot. Smiling at everyone. I feel like a psychopath.”

“How’s that working out for you?”

The wind slows with the traffic. The music in her car fills the silence. It’s one of the albums I left behind, my favorite band—the one she hates. She never understand my appreciation for sad songs.

The music stops and the background noise eases.

“I should go,” she says. “Just got here.”

“Where is here?”

The white noise erases her goodbye. The automated operator comes on, telling me to hang up and to try again. I sit on the curb with my head in my hands, feeling the traffic and wind tug at my layers.

“I miss you,” I say. “I miss you, I miss you, miss you, miss you,” I say like a child repeating words until they run together, lose meaning, and become nothing but soothing sounds.

Chapter Twenty-Five

A burn of light rushes my closed eyes.

“What the fuck you doing brah!?” shouts a man from the seawall masked behind the flashlight.

I’m on my knees, feet dug in and my hand clinching the knife in my coat pocket.

“Hold the fuck up!” A second voice separates from the barrel of light. A bare-chested local leaps down, stamping the sand before me. “Now, what the fuck you doing here?”

“Sleeping. I’m just, I was just sleeping.”

“Bullshit.”

I glance at the shadow behind the flashlight. “The fuck you looking at?”

I turn back to the closer threat, but refuse to look him in the eyes, which are blackened by the overhead light. Years of wrestling concentrate my eyes on his waist, tracking his hips. His weighted chest reverberates with his jumpy movements, and his steroid belly puffs to attention. Homemade tattoos, stretch marks, and veins snake toward balled fists, stitching a body hardened on the salty seascape.

With a fifty yard head start I could outrun most anyone, even with my pack, but my body isn’t built for quick bursts. My instinct to run is checked by his shooting hand, tucked behind his back, adjusting what is holstered in the waist band of his cutoff jean shorts.

“Why were you in that tree?” His shaved head rolls between his shoulders.

“What tree?”

Eyes shattered with broken blood vessels, flicker over me. “Don’t fucking play dumb.”

I pull off my stocking cap and clench it to keep my hand off my knife.

“What you doing here!?” he asks, bobbing forward then back.

Fear and sedated rage strangle my voice. “Sleeping... Just sleeping... I’m nobody... I was just sleeping.”

Every night on the road I envisioned being found by just such a man. Part of me craved it, to be left alone with a swollen face and fresh scars. But as with all the fights I avoided in my youth, the aggressor merely pushes me, makes me retreat inch-by-inch from a sturdy vision of myself.

“Take off your jacket.”

I unzip it and toss it over with the knife clipped in the pocket.

“And that one.”

I shuck it off, growing smaller and more exposed. I strip my shirt, shoes, then socks, holding my arms out while he pats down my pants and knocks my crotch with the back of his hand. My clothes are piled before me. He makes me turn as he rifles through my things, telling me to keep my eyes on the sea. I listen for the dainty click of a hammer. This isn’t right. Shivering hungry and alone through the dark hours of Pacific rain, this is not the vision of death I took comfort in. When Anezka’s phone stops ringing with Hawaiian numbers, when the postcards from hotels I’ve never stayed at stop, when

she searches for reports of bodies washed ashore, when she flies out for an impromptu vacation to collect my things and ask the police if there's anything else they can tell her, the report is supposed to say that all the bones in my fists were shattered, that my nails were filled with blood, that no sand was found on my knees and that my palms weren't pierced in attempt to prevent the inevitable.

“Why the fuck you have a knife?” The weapon looks like a toy in his hand.

My heart braces against my ribs. I stutter but find no answer.

“You what?”

“Protection.”

“From what?” The answer seems obvious. The blade clicks in place then snaps shut. “Why were you in that tree?”

I wished I had been by the tree, any tree. I'd at least have an answer. My weight shifts between feet. I'm a boy caught trying to explain the illogical impulses of childhood. If I could articulate why I was here I wouldn't be here.

“Don't you fucking move. If you move I will strike you.”

My arms hang out on an imaginary crossbeam. The chill of warm blood rushes to my nose in preparation for impact. Thoughts empty. I can see through the back of my head. My ears tingle. If he hits me, the sting would catapult my body into action, at least for a moment, or would it? Perhaps a head blow would simply make my body crumple. Which did I prefer, to watch myself be a coward, believing that the less I fought the less I'd be beaten, or to throw the first punch? What will catapult me into action? If he was

threatening Anezka, maybe, I hoped I would act, but I couldn't be sure. My head empties, save for the vision of its contents wetting the soft sand.

“You don't have no sand in your pockets?”

“What?”

“If you slept on the beach you'd have sand in your pockets.”

I bite my lips like a mouth guard. He grabs my back pants pockets.

“Ain't even sand on your pants bra”

“My pants are synthetic. They don't pick up sand.”

“Bullshit.”

In my periphery, I feel his open hand vault toward my face. I don't flinch. His palm presses my temple. He dusts the sand that comes off on his shorts.

“Your arms ain't sandy.”

“I was wearing the jackets.”

“Don't get smart. You think you're smarter than me?”

A ragged speed boat rocks in the bay just beyond the slip. The sensible thing to do would be to take me to sea and shoot me clean off the deck. Water absolves all guilt. Who would witness my disappearance at four in the morning from a lightless beach? Who would notice I was gone? Anezka would simply think I found someone else to obsess over. I'd be just another dead drifter, a number waiting in cold storage, unclaimed, and donated to science to be cut up exactly like a fish found washed up on the beach and studied by marine biologists to understand why so many died the same way.

“Who you work for?”

“Work? No one.”

“The cops cutting you a deal for spying on us? You a cop?”

A concentrated force jabs my skull.

“I’m not a cop. If I was with the cops wouldn’t they be rushing in right now?”

I could sense him looking around, growing almost angry at this reasoning.

“Why you wearing a headlamp?”

“In case something happens.”

“Happens? What would happen?”

“Bugs and things. Slugs. Rats trying to get at my pack.”

“What the fuck you doing out here with all this spy gear?” He prods my pack.

“It’s camping equipment. I’m camping.”

“Where the fuck is your tent, your little gas grill and shit? Why the fuck you don’t stay in the resorts like a normal tourist?”

“I don’t have the money.”

“Bullshit. How the fuck you get out here if you don’t have the money?”

“I had enough for a ticket, not hotels.”

“But why are you here?”

“I walked up from Kapa’a today. Just needed a place to sleep where I wasn’t bothering no one.”

“Bullshit you walked from Kapa’a. That’s twenty miles. Bullshit you walked.” He jabs me again, then orders me around with quick, military commands.

He strips my headlamp to light the path to the tree. The Kilauea lighthouse blips on the distant ridge. I point this out. The headlamp shoots back to me. My hands jump in front of my face.

“I’ll fucking strike you, if you don’t put your hands down.”

The light falls from my eyes to my hand.

“You married?” asks the voice behind the flashlight.

The lopsided ring looks black. Still, it means someone will notice if I vanish. I explained that I love Anezka, how I plan to marry her when I return. I believe it in that moment, when all I want is to be tucked in safely at her side.

“Why the fuck she ain’t here with you, you love her so much?” The bare-chested man grabs my hand. “I bet you stole this ring off some kid and thought it was worth something.”

The headlamp attacks my face, inches from my temple. The man’s eyes shake. I think of the postcards yet to arrive, leading Anezka back to me, how she will reread them, find in them some cryptic foresight into my coming death, how my words will speak from beyond the dead instead of just making her eyes roll, or will they?

“Give me your fucking ID,” he says, “And it better say you’re from Texas and you’re fucking married, yeah.”

He leans over me as I dig through my pack. I tell him the ID doesn’t say anything about marital status. I hand over my ID without a fuss after all that time practicing my fake name and address, telling myself that I’d remain anonymous. As with love and danger, ideals are the first to crumble.

I remove my ID from the secret slit in the side of my medicine bag.

“Give me everything in there.”

I remove the hundred dollars.

“What’s that?” I don’t even recognize the slip of paper I hand him until he unfolds it.

“It’s my receipt for donating blood in Oahu.” I say.

“They pay you? You give fucking junky blood to Hawaiian hospitals?”

“No. The blood bank had cookies and I needed a break from the heat.”

He studies the slip but there is little on it.

“Let’s get out of here,” snaps the voice behind the flashlight. “He’s just a beach rat. Let’s go and finish this shit.”

The bare-chested man’s eyes moved from the paper to the trees and back to me.

“I ain’t no fucking thief,” he says, tossing my bank card and money back at me, then dropping my head lamp.

Darkness returns as they move away. I stand, waiting. Nothing but wind.

“Fucking haole,” I hear one of them explain to others lurking in the dark.

The lighthouse flickers through the trees. These men aren’t novice outlaws looking for an easy target on which to hone their violence. They’re not even worried I’ll call the cops. Do they assume I’m running from something too, or do they know that none of their cop cousins will even bother to document my story?

I do pushups to ease the itch of adrenaline telling me to run. If I was a drug runner who stumbled on me, I’d have stomped my mouth shut and stolen my money. Then

again, maybe this is just one more scene I'd back down from without a fuss. I'm nothing of the man I practiced to be as a boy, jumping off roofs or boxing my brother. I'm simply a survivor, neither too brave nor too timid. I persist by going unnoticed, by being underestimated and unthreatening. I'm a piece of landscape, a swab of tumbleweed rolling through, and maybe that isn't such a bad thing.