

This Is Paradise



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First Edition

For my parents,
Nancy and David,
'o wau nō me ka ho'omaika'i

THIS IS PARADISE

Midmorning the lifeguards fan across the beach and push signposts into the sand. The same picture is on all of them: a stick figure, its arms aloft, its circle head drowning in a set of triangle waves. CAUTION, the signs read. DANGEROUS UNDERTOW.

We ignore it. We've gone out at Mākaha and Makapu'u before. We've felt Yokes pull us under. We are not afraid of the beaches and breaks here in Waikīkī. We are careless, in fact, brazen. So when we see her studying the warning, chewing the right side of her lip, we laugh. *Jus' like da kine, scared of da water. Haoles, yeah.*

The tourist girl is white. They're all white to us unless they're black. She has light brown hair, a pointed nose, eyebrows neatly plucked into a firm line. She wears a white bikini with red polka dots. Triangle-cut top, ruffled bottom. We shake our heads at her. Our 'ehu hair, pulled into ponytails, bounces against our necks. Our bikinis

are carefully cut pieces with cross-back straps and lean bottoms. We surf in these, *sista*. We don't have time for ruffles and ruching. But she does, like every other tourist. Her blue-and-white-striped hotel towel labels her for what she is.

So why do we look at her as we pass? Why do we notice her out of the hundreds of others? Do we already know she's marked, special in some way?

At the high tide line Cora Jones and Kaila Ka'awa pull on rashguards to protect against the trade winds, which are wailing this morning. The rest of us pretend we don't have chicken skin. We strap our leashes to our ankles, careful to piece the Velcro together, and then we jump on our boards and feel them skim across the surface of the water. Arching our backs, our hips pressed into hard fiberglass, we dig the water with our hands. We raise one foot for balance, and because we know we are silhouetted against the horizon, we hold our heads high, we point our toes. Our bodies curve upward, like smiles, beckoning those on shore to follow.

When we look back, the tourist girl is approaching the ocean's edge. She walks into the water, the small waves lapping at her feet, ankles, knees, chest. We see her dip her shoulders into the whitewash. We don't tell her to stay away from the retaining wall in front of Baby Queens or that today the current is moving from 'Ewa to Diamond Head. We paddle, and in a moment, we've left her behind.

Only local folks leave us money, placing it on top of the television in an envelope with the word "Housekeeping" printed across the front. We split the cash, tucking it into our shoes where management won't look for it.

We, the women of Housekeeping, get left other things, too, but by accident. The Japanese leave behind useful items: tubes of sunscreen, beach floaties, snorkel gear, unopened boxes of cereal, half-filled bottles of American whiskey, brand-new packets of travel tissues decorated with Choco-Cat and Hello Kitty, which our youngest girls love. The tissues we take. Even when management checks the pockets of our uniforms, they never think to confiscate packets of tissues. We don't get in trouble for bringing those home. The rest we throw into trash bags or hide on the bottom shelf of our carts to leave at the loading dock for night security. Management doesn't check their pockets.

What mainland Americans leave behind makes us blush: used condoms under the bed, a turquoise bra with thick cups like soup bowls, pornographic magazines. We find a single blue sandal, a hairbrush tangled with yellow hair, a vibrating toothbrush, a stuffed bear with a missing arm and glass eyes. Such intimate pieces to forget.

Today we have been cleaning rooms for five hours, since six in the morning. Tucking the bottom sheets at least eight times, disinfecting the sinks and bathtubs, vacuuming the

dark brown carpets. We have cleaned twelve rooms and have eight more to go. We pause in the hallway. We don't have time to rest, but we do anyway, just for a moment. The door to room 254 is open, and we watch a young woman tie a white wrap around her waist. Her polka-dot bathing suit is damp and turns the white fabric sheer, the red dots shining through like mosquito bites. She catches us watching her. "You don't need to replace the towels," she says, smiling. "Conserve water." Her teeth are coins, flat and shiny. We want to tell her to wear a thicker skirt, but it's not our place to speak to guests.

A young man appears from behind the wall and walks around the foot of the bed: "I already left mine on the floor."

The girl rolls her eyes. "Then pick it up," she scolds. She turns to give us an exasperated smile, and we are reminded of our eldest daughters: impatient with nonsense, bossing their brothers, keeping the house. This girl, like our girls, is the type a mother can depend on to *do* things: drive Grandmother to a doctor's appointment, cook breakfast for Papa, dress and feed the babies before school. We smile back at her. We feel as if we can trust her.

The young man finally emerges from the bedroom—shoelaces untied, hat pulled low over his eyes—and she smacks him lightly on the arm. "You take longer than a girl," she says. She laughs, a light, tinkling giggle. He laughs. They look at us, so we laugh. At the end of the

hall, she turns and waves at us. We nod, small smiles tightening our lips, and then we enter the room to make the beds.

We think of her for the rest of our shift, chuckling at her bossiness and cheer. When we return our carts, the manager doesn't bother to check our pockets, which makes this a good day, and we decide the American girl has brought us luck.

The hotel is strict about a great number of our activities. They have rules on how to store the carts, what time to punch in, what time to punch out, how to answer the phone (always start with "Aloha"), how to arrange the pillows on the bed, how to report suspicious activity. The last rule was created to fight terrorism, though we wonder what kind of terrorists would stay in Waikīkī. In fact, we don't entirely understand this rule or trust it. It seems designed only to make trouble for us. We've heard stories, after all, stories about workers like us who tried to obey the rule. Stories like the one about Janora Cabrera, who saw a man pressing a woman against a wall and reaching up her skirt on the penthouse floor. Janora told her shift manager about what she had seen. The shift manager reported it to the night auditor, who deferred to the daytime manager. Together, they reprimanded Janora. "You are only to report suspicious behavior," they told her. "You are not to involve yourself with our guests' lives."

Our shift ends at two in the afternoon, and we exit the hotel from the basement, a hot tunnel that smells of dryer

sheets. This is where the housekeeping office is located and where we are kept, tucked away from the visitors who wander in and out of the front lobby. From here we cannot hear their sandals clap against the polished marble floors nor see their eyes widen as they first glimpse the Pacific through the glass windows of the lanai. We exit onto a sidewalk spotted with old gum stains and the faint red splatter of a spilled shave ice.

At the bus stop, waiting to go home, we laugh with one another. We talk of our husbands and our children. How fast they grow, our little ones, how quickly they move through school, through friends, through clothes. Already the youngest speak more English than we do, and the eldest make plans to go to college. We're proud of them, scared for them. We want them to go. We want them to stay in the house to help us. We even want, in some small part of our hearts, to send them back home to Pohnpei or Yap or Kosrae so they can really learn what it means to be one of us. Already they are American.

On the ride home, our shoulders ache and our shoes feel tight around our swollen feet. We close our eyes and let the bus's air-conditioning wash over us like a wave.

We tap the gas pedal, then hit the brakes again. Our cars lurch to a stop. Our heels and briefcases slide across the passenger seat, and one shoe drops to the floor with a hollow thunk. As successful career women we left work feel-

ing powerful, but the traffic at Kapi'olani and Kalākaua has ended that. We might be the ones chosen to mold our islands' future, but we're stuck like everyone else, our cars moving at the speed of pbi.

We stare into the four-story convention center, its glass walls lending the impression of a squared fishbowl. A dental convention is in town, and we watch as a cluster of attendees crowd the escalator. On the ground floor they shake hands and exchange business cards. One of them reaches into his plastic goody-bag to show off a collection of maps, pamphlets, and lastly some travel toothbrushes, which causes riotous laughter among the group. We are not privy to the joke, but our mouths are sticky from nine hours at the office. We could use those toothbrushes right now.

We could also use massages and an end to this traffic. Esther Lu could use a glass of wine, which she would sip on the couch when she finally reaches her condo. Laura Tavares would like two hours of television, preferably the Food Channel. The rest of us want a personal chef. Lacking one, we'll probably call our parents and see what they're having for dinner, which we do on more evenings than we'd care to admit. One more benefit of returning home to the islands.

Despite our tendency toward culinary laziness, our exhaustion is not allowed to overtake us this evening. Tonight, we're celebrating. Laura just submitted her proposal for a LEED-certified resort on Maui, and we hear

her firm will win the bid; Kiana Naone was promoted to Politics Editor at the *Honolulu Advertiser*; and Esther will take the lead on a high-profile murder case that all but promises her making partner in a year. After years of part-time jobs and student loans and late nights with a desk lamp's yellow light on our books, we've made it. Or are making it. Or are close to saying we will make it.

It doesn't hurt that we're from here. We are considered by our peers to be local women who've done well, left but come back, dedicated their education and mainland skills to putting this island right. We speak at civic club gatherings and native rights events. We are becoming pillars of the island community. We are growing into who we've always dreamt of being. But sometimes, late at night and alone beneath the hand-stitched Hawaiian quilts we can finally afford to purchase, we wish we had followed our law and grad school boyfriends to D.C. or Chicago. We could have foregone being pillars. We could have been regular women.

Meeting room doors are flung open and dentists stream from the fishbowl. The day's activities at the convention center are ended. The dentists cross the Ala Wai Canal, swarm the bridge on Kalākaua Avenue, and the traffic stands completely still as our cars are consumed by a mass of people armed with travel toothbrushes. Some jackass honks his horn like it's going to move the herd. The dentists all look so similar, with their neatly cut hair, ruler-straight teeth, and habit of striding with purpose, as

if their assistance is urgently needed elsewhere. We can't help but wonder which of them are single.

In this moment of exit, their spirits high from presentations on the latest anesthetic or whitening solution, the dentists forget where they are. Hawai'i has less tropical flavor than they recall from the morning, less exoticism, less beauty. Waikīkī has become like any other city strip. We'd like to tell them that Waikīkī is nothing more than a succession of Hyatts and Courtyard by Marriotts, Cheesecake Factories and Planet Hollywoods, Señor Frogs and dingy Irish pubs with names like Murphy's and Callahan's. We'd like to tell them the real Hawai'i is elsewhere, hidden in the karaoke bars on King Street and on Waimānalo's ranch lands, in the view of the Mokes from Pillboxes and along the beach by Dillingham Air Strip, the portion of North Shore where only locals camp. We could tell them, but we say nothing.

Our cars inch forward. We stare out the windows, bored. A woman in a polka-dot bikini and pareo is shopping in one of the ABC convenience stores. Why do women from the Continent think they should shop in their bikinis? She buys two bags of Kona coffee, four boxes of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, a string of cheap Pacific pearls, and a stack of postcards featuring various beaches all bathed in the reddish light of the same sunset. Her brother—same ski-jump nose, same narrowly set eyes—holds up a T-shirt, pointing proudly to the central image: a hula girl wearing a coconut bra, grass skirt, and

lei. The hula girl's skin is fair, haole skin, and we're not sure if this makes the image better or worse.

The light changes. Our cars inch forward again. We return our gaze to the dentists, whose spouses are waiting for them in front of numerous hotel lobbies. The spouses are tired and hungry and pink as boiled shrimp from their day at the beach. The kids—all ages—are bored or playing video games or asking when they can next swim in the hotel pool. We pretend that, if on vacation ourselves, we would act differently—hike Koko Head, attend a bon dance, visit the Palace and learn about the Hawaiian monarchy—but deep down, we know we'd do the same as they: venture no farther than the nearest Starbucks.

In front of Denny's, one of the kids whines, "I wanted Mickey-ear pancakes," and the mother says to her husband, "Next year, Florida." We want to tell the boy we understand: Hawai'i lacks a Toon Town and roller coasters. And outside of Waikīkī, the native dress seems suspiciously similar to what's on sale at Macy's. Hawai'i is no fantasyland.

Men fill the Lava Lounge the way sand fills a tidepool: at the edge of the rock walls and then creeping toward the center. A game is on—at the Lava Lounge, a game is always on—and a spontaneous moan issues from the bar. The men's faces tilt upward, in the direction of the big-

screen TVs mounted above the top-shelf liquor, and their arms are crossed in such a way that their beer rests in the crooks of their left elbows. They speak to each other out of the corners of their mouths, analyzing plays and players and, maybe once, a woman who crosses their field of vision. They are not immune to us, but they aren't ready to pursue us yet either. In the meantime, we order dinner and describe the waves we caught this morning.

The women in the bar—the ones other than us local girls—are tourists or college students eager to start the night. They pretend to watch the game, but their Lycra skirts and jean short-shorts give them away. One girl—petite, barely twenty-one, if that—has tucked her sheer tank top into a neon orange skirt. When she bends over, we glimpse the top of a pink thong. She seems to enjoy bending over.

We want to tell her to wait, bide her time. Let the men drink and enjoy their game, and when they're good and ready, they'll notice you. But we know she won't listen to us. She's in a hurry to pair off, stake a claim, fall ecstatically into someone's arms or bed. Watching her, we feel we are being flung through time and space, that the rush of air on our faces is the world spinning faster for this girl, for all girls.

Our burgers arrive and we look at each other, surprised. Haven't we already hurled ourselves past this moment? Hasn't the fourth quarter ended? Haven't the men

climbed down from their stools and taken up residence with a table of women? Isn't the night already careening to its end? A reggae band has assembled its drum set on the low wooden stage. The singer presses his mouth against the microphone: "One-two-three, check. One-two-three, check."

Our plates are cleared, the girl in the orange skirt rests her fingertips on the muscled arm of an army man, and we complain, as usual, about all these haoles coming on our land, even though we've come to Waikīkī. But where else can we go for a strip of bars and clubs? For our friends' band, and the other young locals we'll see? Why do we have to share it with all these tourists, military, college kids? We are just getting good and worked up when we spot the polka-dot girl from this morning. She stands at the entrance, hesitating, the spotlights outside illuminating her body, the soft curve of her hips, her small breasts. She's wearing a maroon dress, nothing flashy, simple in its loose cut, with a hemline that grazes her thighs. She glances furtively around the bar, then makes a beeline for an empty two-top, a high bar table with a pair of backless stools. A boy falls in her wake. Not a boy, exactly. But not a man either. He doesn't touch her but mirrors her, watches her for clues as to what he should do. Her younger brother or cousin, we decide, as he orders piña coladas for both of them.

She keeps glancing around the bar, sizing up the men and the plastic tiki decorations. The night's possibilities

widen her eyes. We want to make fun of her, but she possesses a certain girlishness that awakens our forgiveness. It's not her fault she's haole.

We turn our attention to the men. The local boys have finally arrived, and they look our way. "You like cruise wit' us?" they ask, and we answer, "What? You tink we come hea fo' talk story wit' you?" They laugh at that. They like our hard to get, and they respond, visiting us in small posses of three or four, clustering around our table. We know they're wondering who they'll pair up with, and that that's what we're deciding, too. Which one of these bruddas, or none at all?

The youngest of the three Aiu boys asks Lani Pogan to dance, and the two of them weave among the tables until they are directly in front of the band. He hangs his head and bounces slightly, feeling the beat, and Lani, in her white dress, winks at the singer. She's the worst flirt of us all, and the most hot-tempered, but that's what we like about her. The eldest Aiu asks Mel Chun to come outside for a smoke, and Mel grabs a pack lying on the table. Even though she grew up in San Francisco, the "healthiest city in the world," she claims, she smokes when she goes out. She goes out a lot, she says, subsisting on Heineken and hamburger patties to make up for a childhood of healthy living. Despite her habits, Mel's body is a ball of hard muscle. After four years of competitive outrigger paddling, she's been accepted by us, become one of us locals.

Another round of li hing mui margaritas and the rest of

us join Lani on the dance floor. Our little tourist is bouncing on her stool, her ponytail swinging to the beat of the music, while her brother approaches the bar to order more drinks. Ricky, the bar manager, lowers the house lights and turns on a pair of blue strobes that pulsate in time to the drumbeat. Cora Jones raises her hand parallel with her eyes and wiggles her fingers at Ricky. She calls this her come-and-get-it wave, but we think it makes her eye look like squid tentacles are growing from it. Lani nudges us and laughs. Cora's magic works, though: a minute later Ricky is lining up shot glasses on our table. "And one fo' you, sista," he says to our tourist, plopping a shot glass in front of her.

She takes it in a single gulp and smiles at us. "Thanks for sharing," she says brightly. "I'm Susan." A couple of us nod and smile back, but Lani ignores Susan completely. "Cora neva get one fo' her," she says.

Ah, none of us paid, but. On da house, we reply.

Lani doesn't care. "She not one of us, her," she says loud enough for Susan to hear.

We're studying Susan, wondering how she'll respond. If she accepts she's an outsider, then perhaps we could hānai her, bring her into the fold for the night. But if she doesn't understand, then she's just another haole. She doesn't talk back to Lani, which wins her some points, but a few minutes later we overhear her whispering to her brother: "Everyone talks about aloha here, but it's like

Hawaiians are all pissed off. They live in paradise. What is there to be mad about?"

We look at each other, and we feel the heat rising in our faces. Our families are barely affording a life here, the land is being eaten away by developers, the old sugar companies still control water rights. Not only does paradise no longer belong to us, but we have to watch foreigners destroy it. We have plenty aloha for someone who appreciates. We have none for a girl like this. Lani stands like she's about to give a lecture or pop Susan one in the face—which for Lani might be the same thing—but we make her sit down. *Not wort' da trouble, we say, and for once Lani lets it go.*

On the dance floor, Mel has abandoned the elder Aiu and is looking tight with a new guy. We watch them, wondering who he is. He's not a local boy—his skin is too fair, his hair too short—but he doesn't seem straight haole either. He has a solid tan, and he navigates the bar like he's cruised here before. He touches Mel gently on the shoulder, as if to draw her close to him, or just to feel her skin, and us girls raise an eyebrow. We don't like how close he's getting to her before we know who he is.

His hair is shaved close to the scalp, and he dances with the stiffness of a military man. Cora guesses Navy. Lani says Air Force. We watch him raise his arms as if to rest a lei upon Mel's shoulders, and she looks up at him, smiling. He clasps his hands at the back of her neck and bends his

knees slightly to look her full in the face. Mel swirls her hips against his, and when a blue strobe illuminates them, we see, on the underside of his right wrist, a tattoo of a mask with tears.

"He's an actor," Cora says excitedly. Cora is majoring in theater at University of Hawai'i. She's our group's academic. "His tattoo is the Greek tragedy mask."

Lani shakes her head. "Da lef' wrist, like look." Just above his watch we glimpse another mask, this one unmarred by tears and wearing a smile.

"Comedy," Cora says, but the rest of us shake our heads. Cora grew up in Kailua. She can be so naive sometimes.

"Smile now, cry later," Lani says.

Prison, the rest of us explain. *Prison ink*.

Cora's face turns pink. "We should go get her."

Lani shrugs as if she doesn't care. She's a Nānākuli girl and likes to pretend she's tougher than the rest of us. But we know better. Whether someone claims Mākaha or Waimānalo or Wahiawa, once they move to town, they lose some of their edge. These days Lani would never play with men headed to or coming from prison.

Cora starts to march toward the dance floor, but we stop her. *Let Lani handle dis*, we say. Cora isn't known for her subtlety. Lani, however, is a master. She sidles up next to Mel and her man and makes like all three of them are going to dance together. We can tell he's pleased with this turn of events by the way he spreads open his arms and hands, as if to embrace both women, a world of women.

Mel shoots us a confused look over her shoulder, and with a little jerk of our heads, we tell her to come back to the table. But she has no chance to act on her own. By the time she returns her gaze to the dance floor, Lani has already nudged her into a crowd of our friends—the Aiu boys and some of the band's crew—and then pushed her along to us.

"Why make me leave?" Mel asks.

"Cause I neva like yoa taste in men," Lani shoots back, and we laugh.

Mel glances at the dance floor, where her partner is looking for her. "Bryan seemed sweet," she says. "He moved here from California like me."

We shake our heads. We can't believe this guy already has a name. "Did Bryan tell you what he was in prison for?" Cora asks.

"Prison?" Mel says. "I don't think so." We tell her about the ink. She tries to protest but she knows we're telling the truth.

Kaila Ka'awa, whose two brothers have spent most of their lives in and out of county jail, defends Bryan. "You neva know. Could be nutting serious. Jus' borrow one car, yeah."

"You mean steal a car?" Cora says.

"I mean borrow," Kaila says. "But fo'eva. And neva leave one note."

We crack up at that, even Mel, and she thanks us for looking out for her. That's what we do, we tell her. That's

what any girls would do. We watch out, we keep each other safe. Maybe he's a good guy, but no sense taking that chance, you know? He's not one of the guys we cruise with, not a local boy. So no worries. We didn't offend anyone important.

The band goes on a break, except for the bassist, who pulls out a guitar polished to a brilliant shine. The bassist is a haole boy, blond as his guitar, with a round, freckled face. He doesn't look legal drinking age. He barely looks old enough to smoke, and Lani sneers, "Tink he one mean guitarist. Like play some emo shit I bet." Haole Boy takes his time tuning the guitar, loosening the higher strings and humming slightly to himself. Lani looks around for Ricky to ask for the bill, but Kaila is watching our bassist-turned-guitarist carefully. Her father plays everything from uke to guitar to drums, and he dances, too, so she knows this scene well. When Kaila pays attention to a performer, we all do.

At last, our haole strums his open strings, and Kaila laughs to herself. "Ho, Haole Boy tune G wahine? He like play slack?" She shakes her head, as if this is the last thing she thought she'd ever see, and she pulls on Lani's dress to make her sit down.

The guitarist takes a deep breath, and then his fingers are flying across the strings. He plays "Whee Ha Swing" like he's Sonny Chillingworth reincarnated, chords and single notes blending tight, so clean and layered that when we close our eyes, we think two guitarists must be on-

stage. Lani is watching him. When he takes the tempo up, she shivers with pleasure. "Dat boy is mean," Kaila whispers.

"That boy is local," Cora agrees.

"No," Lani says. "Dat boy is one kanaka." At this, we laugh. Lani has paid her highest compliment. She has called him Hawaiian.

We continue to watch the guitarist, his fingers jumping quick as fleas, but out of the corners of our eyes we also notice Bryan approach Susan. He leans his elbows on her table and pulls teasingly at her brother's hat, like he's family, an older cousin or uncle. Susan giggles, and in the blue light, her maroon dress turns a deep purple. "Not everyone can be local," Cora says, motioning toward Susan before returning her attention to the guitarist.

Bryan pulls up a stool and sits between Susan and her brother. He rests a hand on Susan's arm, and she laughs at something he's said, reaching up to graze his cheek with her fingers. Her brother laughs, too, encouraging Bryan to tell another story. Bryan shakes his head and makes a motion like he wants to smoke. The brother pulls a pack from his pocket, but Bryan shakes his head again. He leans close to the table and whispers a secret. We can guess what he's proposing.

Our slack-key guitarist finishes with a smile and ducks his head in humility. "Mahalo nui loa," he murmurs into the microphone. "I thank my uncles Bill and Nahele for giving me this gift I share with you." We bow our heads,

too, in reverence to this boy's uncles, his kumu. Yeah, he is one of us, honoring his kūpuna and making his people proud. We respect that.

During the break we head to the restroom, and Susan is there, applying makeup in the mirror. We look at each other, wondering if we should speak to her about Bryan or let her find out by herself. The bathroom is small, slightly cramped, but we all remain, taking turns in the stalls, washing our hands, combing our fingers through our hair, staring at the prints of hula girls hanging on the wall. Finally, we are finished. No more hands can be washed, no more hair adjusted. Lani leans against the door, about to open it, about to leave, when Kaila says to Susan, "Hey, Sista, not my place, but. Da guy you wit' has prison tatt's."

"I know." Susan says, speaking to us through the mirror. Her reflection looks at Kaila's. "He told me all about it. He got out two weeks ago."

Kaila raises her eyebrows.

Susan laughs lightly. "Don't worry. He was just in for dealing pot. You know how it is: wrong place, wrong time."

"Jus' be careful," Kaila says. She turns and faces Susan. "You no know him. Yoa brudda no know him."

"You girls really don't want visitors to have a good time, do you?" Susan shrugs. "Whatevs." With a tight smile, she snaps her purse shut and brushes past Lani. The bathroom door swings in Susan's wake, and we are all left staring at the empty space.

Our final toast is to Kiana's promotion at the *Advertiser*, and we drain our glasses. "How did it get so late?" she asks. The clock on Bar Ambrosia's wall insists it's one in the morning.

How did we drink so much? How did we laugh so hard? We feel loose and giggly, the way we always feel after a night together.

"How did this bar get so—" Esther pauses, palms upturned as if waiting for an answer from heaven. We study the orange walls, the stainless steel tables, the plasma televisions, the chrome salt and pepper shakers.

"Vegas?" Laura suggests.

"MoMA in New York," Kiana says.

Modern. Moneyed. Mainland. We take turns adding adjectives.

"This bar is anything but local," Paula Gilbert agrees. Paula is the only one of us who's never lived off island, never left for college. She is the most local of all of us. Paula is also the only one who is married; she has a two-year-old baby boy and is six months pregnant with a girl. In rare moments, we feel a certain jealousy of her.

As a police officer, Paula manages the rookies as they leave the academy for their stints in Waikīkī. Years ago, she asked to be placed elsewhere—Makiki, Kāhala, even downtown—but now she is resigned to her steady flow of rookies and accepts that Waikīkī is her beat, her training

ground and her kingdom. This resignation we view with both scorn and envy. We can't understand how Paula can accept her inferior posting, yet we wish that we, too, could be content with what we've already attained. Perhaps then we'd have the husband and the babies and the home. Perhaps then we'd have more than our careers and our selves.

"Anything but local," Laura repeats. "That's why I come here." We nod our heads in agreement. Here, no tiki decorations hang on the wall. Piña colodas and mai tais are replaced with Manhattans. Reality in space-age pepper shakers.

"Ain't no Lava Lounge, ladies," Esther says.

"Thank goodness we've graduated from that place," Kiana chimes in. We laugh as we remember our days there.

How old is that place? We ask ourselves. Been around forever. Since before we left for college.

"Remember the time Esther's brother was working his first beat as a rookie?" Kiana looks slyly at Esther, and we wait for the punchline, laughing before she says it. "And who comes out of Lava Lounge so drunk she can't see straight but his baby sister!"

"And who's the big attorney now," Laura teases.

Esther hangs her head in mock shame. "Yeah, well, remember when Paula met Jason there?"

"Oh God, that is how we met," Paula says. "I sometimes forget. He and I told our parents we met in church." She

sends us into fresh laughter. Jason and Paula met the July before the rest of us went into our senior year of college. Paula had just earned her associate's degree from Honolulu Community. She was already talking about settling down and starting a family, already setting herself apart from us as we set our sights on mainland jobs and graduate programs.

Our voices echo as we leave the hotel bar. In the lobby, we pause to check that we have house keys and sweaters, that no one has to use the restroom, that no one forgot a cell phone or purse. We are standing in the hotel lobby saying our goodbyes when a couple staggers through the front entrance. We can hear the woman's voice—loud and authoritative—describing a club she visited in Los Angeles. For a moment we study her and the man she's with: he has high cheekbones and olive skin, full lips, extraordinarily tiny ears; she has a ski-jump nose. We remember the nose. She's the girl from the ABC Store. Her brother joins them in the elevator. The door closes, and we look back at each other.

"Oh, to be young again," Laura says lightly.

We kiss each other on the cheek and promise it won't be so long till next time. Paula reminds us that her baby shower is in one month. "And men are welcome, so bring your boyfriends!" she adds cheerfully.

"I think you got the last good one!" Kiana means to sound playful, but a rough edge finds itself in her voice. How do we admit that finding a man who is as successful

and as driven and as single as we are is not an easy task?

Paula chuckles humbly. "Oh, no. Plenty other Jasons where I found mine."

"At the Lava Lounge?" Laura asks. We start laughing again. We pause only when the smell of pakalolo wafts over us. We look around the lobby, and the young woman's brother is already back. His eyes are round and red. We look at each other, eyebrows raised.

"Wonder where he got that from," Esther says.

"I should probably arrest him," Paula says, sticking her hands in her pockets. "But I'm off duty right now." We watch him slink through the front entrance toward Kalākaua Avenue.

"Where's his sister?" Laura asks.

Esther glances around the empty lobby. "She must still be upstairs."

Paula frowns. "I hope she knows that man she's with really well."

"Probably just met him tonight," Kiana says drily. "I guess that's the point of vacation."

The party begins to break up. Paula offers a ride home to Laura and a couple of others who live on Diamond Head, and they leave. Kiana and Esther linger with the rest of us to talk about Paula's baby bump and the steadiness of Jason's job as a photographer. They live in an 'ohana behind his parents' house. With two kids they'll outgrow the tiny cottage in no time, but they'll never be able to af-

ford their own place. We also wonder about Laura's resort design, worried that another development will push housing prices further upward, making it harder still for our people to remain on their land. "And what about water usage?" Esther demands. Even in conversation with us, she turns hot-blooded lawyer when the subject of land rights comes up. But Kiana rests a hand on Esther's shoulder, and the tension dissipates.

We kiss each other on the cheek one last time. We've let another half hour slip by. As we reach the front door, we spot the tourist girl and her date exiting the elevator. They breeze by us, their heads bent together, his right arm thrown protectively around her shoulders. They are heading for the back of the hotel, where the veranda overlooks the ocean. From there they can gain beach access. Leaving the carpeted lobby, she trips and falls to her hands and knees. But she's up again in a second, giggling with embarrassment, and he laughs with her. He slips his arm around her waist and grips her tightly, steering her away from the lobby.

The humid air carries the sound of their voices to us. "Baby," he says. "Watch yourself."

But she's not listening. She just keeps repeating, "This is it. This is paradise."

They descend the stairs of the veranda and cross the patio. Her body pitches forward as she walks as if she's in a state of perpetual freefall.

As we drive home, we think of nothing but her words.

“Like go home now?” Cora asks us. We are standing outside the Lava Lounge, the music still ringing in our ears and the trade winds cooling our damp skin. It’s nearly two in the morning.

“Can surf early tomorrow,” Lani says. “Mean da swell, yeah.” Australia’s eastern coast has seen record storm activity in the past week, and the newscasters claim that the weather system is finally headed north. We’re giddy with the promise of six-foot faces on the south shore.

“Let’s check the water before we head home,” Mel suggests.

We leave behind the club and Kūhiō Avenue, with its explosion of car horns and police sirens, men hawk-ing coupons for an indoor shooting range—half off for women!—and prostitutes whispering “Aloha” in lilting voices. When we reach the beach, the night is suddenly quiet, and we breathe deeply of the salt air. In the distance, the waves at Pops are gilded by moonlight, and we watch them rise and lumber along, slow and unambitious. By the morning we want them stacking up clean and high.

We pause outside the Banyan Hotel, the warm light from the lobby casting our shadows across the water’s edge. The tide sucks at the sand beneath our toes like a vacuum. We look into the hotel, and we can almost understand why here, in Waikīkī, the world appears perfect. The hotel lobbies are brimming with flower arrange-

ments and sticky with the scent of ginger. The island air is warm and heavy as a blanket. And the people are beautiful. Tan and healthy, with muscles carved from koa wood and cheeks the color of strawberry guava. These people—our people—look fresh as cut fruit, ready to be caressed, to be admired. These are people to be trusted. This is not New York or Los Angeles. No, Hawai’i is heaven. A dream.

Not far from us, we hear someone moan, and we giggle. A girl says, “No,” and we take a step in the direction of the voice. But her husky voice is muffled, and in the next moment we think we hear an excited “Oh.” We stop. We see this all the time. Tourist couples think the beach is some private fantasy island. Like no one can see them out there, when they’re about as hidden from view as mating monk seals. How many times have we glimpsed naked ass, white as moonlight, pumping away for all it’s worth?

We think of all the tourist women who have come here and taken a man to bed with them—or the men who have taken women. Are they proud of themselves, these tourists? Do they feel they’ve acquired the most exotic souvenir, or that they are now true islanders?

Our mood gets heavy fast. We tell each other to loosen up. Tomorrow the surf will be high and we’ll wash away all these questions in the water. We start to walk back to the street. We pause when we hear splashing nearby and a small, thrilled shriek, but when we look down the beach all we see are shadows staining the sand.

For the first time since we were college kids, we dream of the rolling ocean. Not of boardrooms or courtrooms, classrooms or meeting rooms, but of waves, of *room*, as much as we can bear, and the space of the sea. We dream we are falling deep into the ocean. At first the water is warm, comforting even, but suddenly we are scared. We can't find our way up or out. We need air, and none exists beneath the weight of all this water. We hear a woman screaming for help, and we're not sure if the voice is ours or someone else's.

When we awake, our quilts are kicked to the foot of our beds. Kiana has balled her sheet in her hand. Esther's pillowcase is clammy with sweat. Jason takes Paula in his arms, presses her tear-dampened face to his shoulder, and tells her that everything will be okay.

But we don't think everything is okay. Something is amiss, muddled. Years have passed since we listened to our dreams, since we were youthful enough to trust them. Now we take the time to hear ourselves. In the quiet of our bedrooms, we finally fall back asleep, but we remain just below the surface of waking, afraid to again sink completely into sleep.

We're on the early shift again, so we arrive at five in the morning. We begin by dusting the surfaces in the lobby,

vacuuming up the sand guests have tracked in, sweeping the patio—which the busboys for the Banyan Bar will later sweep again—and polishing all the metal fixtures and lampshades. The front desk signs the delivery slip for the arrangement of birds of paradise and centers the vase on the round wooden table in the middle of the lobby. Always birds of paradise, their pointed beaks threatening to stab the first woman who tries to dust the table. Today the stems are unusually long, and the flower heads sink wearily.

As soon as we finish with the common areas, we are supposed to load our room carts and ride the elevator to our assigned floors. But first we always slip away to glimpse the ocean in the first rays of sunlight. The sky is still dark in the west, but the horizon near Diamond Head is blooming with a pale yellow light. We cross the veranda, drawn by this soft glow, and descend to the patio. Even though we are facing east, toward mainland America, we pretend that in the distance, beyond the white haze that hangs above the ocean, lie our home islands. We don't like to think of ourselves as homesick, but sometimes we feel an ache for their still, quiet air.

We kneel to roll a few grains of sand between our fingers. Here, the sand is soft and fine, imported from beaches on Maui and Kaua'i. This sand feels fake to us, unlike the coarser sand of our islands, the sand that, like us, is whole and hardened. We stand and glance up again at the horizon, admire the white-yellow of the sky, and this is when we see her.

She is lying on her side, her right arm tucked beneath her ear, her back turned to us. People sleep out on this beach all the time: drifters, druggies, drunks, runaways, lovers, and tourists too lost or high to care if they make it back to their hotels. We're not sure if we should disturb her, but something in the absolute stillness of her body makes us move toward her. Up close, we see that her hair is stringy and wet, and her dress hem has slid halfway up her left butt cheek. Stassi Nifon tugs on the hem to cover her nakedness, but we are still embarrassed for the girl.

We lean over her and place our hands on the wet cotton of her dress. We shake her gently. "Wake up," we tell her. "It's morning." She doesn't stir. She is heavy in our hands. We command her to get up, to move, but she doesn't listen. When we touch her bare arm, her skin is cold. We jump away from her, startled. Her skin is too cold.

A couple of us run to tell management. Those who hesitated to leave the patio now retreat to the housekeeping office, not wishing to be involved. But those who found her, who touched her, who recognize her—we stay. We form a circle around her, protecting her—even though she is beyond our protection. When management comes running to verify the police are needed, we remain where we are. Our shift leader tells us to go back inside, but we ignore her. Management withdraws to the hotel.

The girl's hair and skin are pale as the sky at sunrise. She is older than even our eldest girls, and, on any other day, we could have called her *haole*, foreigner, a white

woman independent and capable of caring for herself. But in these few minutes before the police come running down the beach with a first-aid kit and walkie-talkie, this girl is a child. She is helpless. She is in need of a mother, and that's a job at which we are experts. The sky lightens in the west to a dull blue as flares of orange rip the eastern sky. *We are here*, we tell the unmoving girl. *All us mothers are here.*

We've just turned the corner at the snack stand when we spot the crowd gathered outside of the Banyan Hotel. "Can jus' surf Canoes," Lani says, pointing to the break in front of us. "No crowd dere yet."

"Bet it's a turtle on the beach," Cora yawns. She presses the heel of her palm to her left temple. We're all a little ragged this morning, from lack of sleep and one too many margaritas. "Turtles always bring out the tourists. No one's in the water." We cross the sand, its cold granules clumping between our toes.

As we draw closer to the crowd, we see police uniforms and hear the odd burst of voice and crackled silence particular to walkie-talkies. The hotel's housekeeping staff, identifiable by their floral-patterned dresses and white tennis shoes, are taking turns being interviewed by a couple of officers. When each interview is complete, the women are pointed in the direction of the hotel, but they refuse to leave the beach. Instead, they return in silence

to the circle their compatriots have formed. The women stand sentinel, very still and very tall. A man in a black windbreaker tries to take photographs of whatever is inside their circle, but each time he asks the housekeeping women to move or attempts to nudge them aside, they block his way. Finally, he gives up and takes his photos in the narrow spaces between the women's bodies. We're past the hotel's patio before we realize the back of the photographer's jacket reads "Coroner's Office."

Mel turns to one of the housekeepers and asks quietly, "Auntie, what happened?"

The woman glances toward the ground shaking her head, and we glimpse a maroon dress, white legs, a half-closed hand. We run to the other side of the circle to see the face, and even when the police yell, "'Ey, get 'em outta hea!" we refuse to budge.

Lani, as always, is the first to speak. "We know her," she says. Her voice is heavy with wonder and shock.

We know her, we repeat. *We know her* and we warned her and we saw him. Cora shakes her head in disbelief. Mel looks sick.

The police officers frown at us in disbelief or annoyance, but one of them, a petite woman with dark skin and a protruding belly, yells at the rest, "Why are you staring at them? Do something." She's older than the other officers, and they defer to her. At first, they tell us to pile our boards on the sand and not go anywhere, but then they wander away to watch the coroner or manage the

growing crowd. A couple of us sigh heavily and we stare out at Pops. We'll miss dawn patrol, we think. And then we're ashamed for being so crass. We'd like to turn off our minds. We'd like to think only of Susan, of her smile when she thanked us for the drink, of the eagerness in her eyes. We'd like to cry, if for no other reason than to prove to ourselves that we are empathetic humans, but we have no tears for her. We're already wondering if we'll make it to work on time, what we should eat for lunch, whether the surf will still be good in the afternoon and not blown out by the winds. Already our lives are moving on, forward, into the future, and Susan's life has been left behind on this beach.

The policewoman follows our gaze with her eyes and watches the waves with us. For a moment, we're all looking at the ocean with the same longing, the same sense of hurling through time and space. She approaches us. "If we talk now, you all should still have time for a short session," she whispers, smiling gently.

We relax. We can trust her. We'll make it into the ocean after all. With sudden clarity, we remember hearing splashing in the water the night before and a woman's scream. We hadn't thought it anything more than a shriek of laughter.

"I tink we heard one scream last night," Cora begins. At the same moment, Lani cuts in with "She neva like listen."

The policewoman pulls out a pad of paper. She looks at all of us at once. "Girls, let's start at the beginning."

By the time Paula conference calls us on our office lines we've already watched the early news. We tell her the police sketch looks just like him, that man with Susan. We have learned the girl's name and now we use it. Susan. It makes us feel as if we're helping her.

Paula tells us a group of surfer girls contributed to the artist's sketch, which Paula personally approved. "Just like how we saw him," she says, echoing the rest of us. Her voice is hollow over the phone, and we know what she's thinking: We're older and more experienced than the Susans of the world. We're career women. We should have seen that Susan was getting herself into trouble. We should have done something.

"What about the brother?" Kiana asks as if to divert attention from herself, or ourselves.

"He returned to the hotel not long after we all went home," Paula says. "He figured they had gone out to a club or something. He didn't think to go looking for his sister. He felt like, if he gave her space, he was helping her out."

"What was he thinking?" Laura asks.

"He wasn't," Kiana says, sighing.

"If my boy left his sister alone in a hotel room with some . . ." Paula stops herself.

We wonder how many days will pass before someone comes forward with information on the suspect. On an island like ours, a man doesn't run. Can't run. The airlines

have his sketches, the ships as well, though we've never heard of a suspect trying to escape via Carnival Cruise Lines. On island, a man has to hide, hunker down, find friends and use them. The question is not how will he be caught, but who will turn him in.

We don't tell each other about our dreams, but we hint at them. *Last night I barely slept*, we say, or *I was awake all night thinking about that girl*. In the early morning, alone in our apartments and condos and houses, when the only sounds were the winds sweeping out of the valleys and a dog barking in the distance, we found ourselves wondering how we escaped those treacherous years of our late teens and early twenties. *We lived in a different time*, we tell each other, and the world suddenly appears fragile and sad.

Esther says Hawai'i is becoming more and more like the mainland, and for once we don't hear anger in her voice, just regret.

But Laura is angry. "If you were in Chicago, would you go home with a man you just met at a bar? Would you trust a stranger with your hotel key in L.A.?"

"If I was young, maybe, and on vacation," Kiana answers.

"How young?" Laura challenges. "This woman, this Susan, she was twenty-two. She should have known better!"

Paula interrupts. "Laura, at that age we hardly knew any better."

"I knew better."

Paula offers a hollow laugh. "I visited you at college. I saw the risks you were willing to take in those days. Inviting guys back to your apartment, getting into cars with friends of friends of friends. You didn't know those guys any better than Susan knew this man."

Laura is quiet.

"Back then we all were that way," Esther says gently. "We were young, naive."

Laura's sadness radiates across the phone lines, and we shiver. "So were we just lucky?"

Throughout the day we argue over Susan, acting as if we knew her enough to speak for her. Some of us claim she was all over that Bryan at the Lava Lounge. Others say she was too innocent to know what he was really after. Cora tries to find a middle ground: "Maybe she wanted to hook up but didn't want to sleep with him, and he got mad."

We watch the news on television, wanting to know the latest updates. Two hotel security guards are interviewed. They say they saw a couple rolling in the sand. "Two lovers," they claim, but when pressed, they admit it could have been a struggle. "All da time we see tings like dat, but," they tell the reporters. We feel disgust with Security. Why didn't they investigate? Why didn't they interrupt? We think of the noises we heard and we ask ourselves the same questions.

In the late afternoon, we hear that the hotel is going to sponsor a small remembrance ceremony and that more than one hundred people plan on attending, mostly locals. Our community has been shaken. We want to give something, but we don't know what or to whom. Susan's family has already stated, via a lawyer, that they will not be present at the ceremony. They know none of us, so they mourn alone. We feel sorry for them. We are angry at them. When they see local people, they must think we are the ones who brought them death.

Us girls buy white plumeria lei at Safeway and put them around our necks. We meet on the beach in front of the Banyan, but we don't stay for the ceremony. Instead, we paddle out to Pops, past the break and into deep water until we are far from any other surfers. We sit on our boards and form a tight circle, our knees bumping into the rails of the boards on either side of us, and we *pule*, we pray. We ask forgiveness. We ask for patience. We ask for guidance, not only for our lives but also for Susan's family, and for the islands. Then we chew through the strings of our lei and toss each flower into the center of the circle. The strings we tie around our wrists.

We begin the long paddle back to land. The flowers are still there when we glance behind, sunlight reflecting off their white petals like small lanterns on the surface of the water.

By the time we return to shore, the beach is filled again with its usual sunbathers and swimmers. All that's

left of the remembrance ceremony is a confused jumble of magenta orchids and red carnations, pale pink roses toppling over green ti leaf, orange birds of paradise sticking out like cheap sparklers. We stand over the pile and look down. The setting sun is hot on the back of our necks, and in the heat all the flowers are wilting.

WANLE

Hawai'i is a cock-pit, on the ground the well-fed cocks fight.

—FROM THE CHANT OF HAUU-KA-LANI

The Indian said "Poi Dog" the way other men say Princess or Babydoll. He always said it real sweet, as if he didn't know the meaning, didn't know a poi dog was a mutt, the kind of dog that finds you and not the kind you breed special. Even in bed, naked and chilled, waiting for the damp air of the valley to rise around us in ghostly mist, he'd whisper, "Poi Dog," and I'd tuck my head beneath his neck to feel his breath hot on my cheek.

I called him the Indian. I didn't mean it bad or good. I just called things what they were, as my father had before me. My dad was the one who named me "Wanle," which he said in Chinese means "It is gone." He claimed, after I