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The Sea and Everything In It

Kirby Wright

The boy stood at the fence line watching Valdez stack wood. The ranch hand was burning the horse. The stink of scorched flesh made the boy feel sick. He watched a hand of black smoke reach through the pasture and wondered if it would grab Flash's spirit and carry it up to Heaven.

He thought about leaving Honolulu. Mummy had said it was only for August and threw him a kiss when he looked back before boarding Aloha Air. This was the first time they'd been apart in all his four years. Mummy was blonde. Her eyes flashed a cold green. He sensed she didn't love him because he looked nothing like her. Sometimes it felt like hate. She'd called him a "scaredy-cat" for running to her bed after a nightmare about flying rats. When she'd found out he'd pried rhinestones out of her porcelain fish, she gave away his kitten. His big brother was Mummy's pet. Troy had her hair and eyes and could always make her laugh.

He'd held the lantern that first night. The grandmother had cradled Flash's head in her lap while Dr. Lux pressed a stethoscope to her belly. The mare's friends had neighed deep in the pasture. The boy had felt the lantern was a part of him and that he was an angel of light sent down to save Flash. There'd been a gasp and the mare shook violently. "Maki?" the old woman had asked as Dr. Lux tucked the stethoscope back in his black bag.

This was the boy's first trip to Moloka'i. The grandmother had parked her blue jeep outside Misaki's Grocer and let him choose macadamia nut ice cream from the deep freeze before she put milk, butter, and a carton of eggs in their basket. Then they'd headed east. The old woman had pointed at the Churches built by Father Damien: they were tiny with high steeples, hibiscus hedges, and square cemeteries. He'd scared himself thinking the ghosts of lepers haunted the grounds.

The grandmother joined him at the fence line, wrapping her gnarled fingers around the wire. They were swollen and bent from arthritis. Her face was as wrinkled as a crumpled bag. She smelled of

VapoRub. She'd rubbed Vick's on her neck and chest before bed to help with breathing. He liked that smell better than cigarettes. Gramma hunched down. The odor of burnt tobacco was in her clothes and it made him think of the horse in the flames.

"Whacha doin', Peanut?" the grandmother asked.

"Nothing, Gramma." The boy felt a tear spill and wiped it away with a sweep of his knuckles

"Nothin', my foot," she snapped.

"I'm watching the fire," he answered, finger combing his crew cut. He wanted to be tough like his hapa haole father. He was glad he took after him. The old woman loved his father more than anyone so it was a good thing to look like him and to have the same short hair.

"Wish dat Valdez'd finish da hell up," the grandmother grouched. She wore a palaka shirt with a red stain, denims, and a lauhala hat. A yellow handkerchief was knotted to the brim.

The boy thought Gramma sounded different today. She made a smacking noise pursing her lips and slurred some of her words. Her mouth seemed hollow. She made him think of the Munchkin mayor in *The Wizard of Oz*, the one with the top hat and body shaped like a pear. She was pear-shaped too. The old woman held a cigarette between her lips, struck a wooden match to life against a fence post, and lit the tip. She sucked the filter the way babies suck bottles and blew smoke through her nose. "Not long befoah dey burnin' me up," she mumbled.

The boy winced. "God wants you in a grave with a cross."

"Says who."

He realized she was toothless. But didn't she have teeth yesterday at Moloka'i Airport? He tried remembering her mouth when she'd poked him awake with a bamboo stick in the rooster light.

"Asked you a question, boy."

"Says Mummy," he shot back. "When you get burned to dust your soul burns to dust too."

"How she come to know dat?"

"Father Keelan."

"Wot Mummy says don't mattah."

"How come?"

"Christ, dat damn wahine's a million miles away."

He liked being called Peanut. He liked it too when she swore talking about his mother. He knew Gramma thought she was a spoiled mainland girl and that her son could have done better. He was glad he didn't look like Mummy. He still loved her but being separated made him feel funny, as if she didn't care what happened to him on the ranch.

This was his “big boy” month with Gramma. His father was preparing for a trial back home while his mother and Troy visited Boston relatives.

The grandmother dropped her cigarette on the grass. She stomped it out with the heel of her boot. “Whacha want fo’ breakfast, Peanut?”

“Sugar Pops.”

“You’ll get eggs an’ be happy with ‘um.”

He followed her toward the beach house, their thin shadows climbing the crab grass incline past the jeep.

The steel roof of the beach house was red with rust. It was a small place with storm windows facing the channel and Maui. The parlor, kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom rested on a foundation of small concrete pyramids, allowing water to pass safely under the house during super tides. The grandmother lived there alone. She’d divorced Chipper after all his cheating drove them both to drink. A desperate sort of loneliness had gnawed away at her and she drank herself numb every morning. She’d fall trying to stand. Shirts and denims were permanently stained from crawling through the red dirt. Christian Scientists traveling ranch-to-ranch had offered friendship, a Bible, and the belief her sins could be erased through prayer and faith. She’d started attending Sunday meetings in a coconut grove at the Fairgrounds and prayed for spiritual guidance. The prayers, the meetings, and fellow Christian Scientists gave her the courage to give up the bottle and deed her destitute ex a life estate on the eastern edge of her property. The boy had never seen him. The grandmother had warned him never to venture east of the ironwoods because Chipper mixed shooting with drinking and might mistake him for a deer.

The old woman had told the boy she was never alone because she had the ocean and all the whales, fish, and turtles in it for company. The waves broke fifty feet away from his bed on the lanai. The crashing water reminded him of thunder. The crashing, buzzing mosquitoes, and chirping geckos had caused him to toss and turn his first night. Just when he’d nodded off, the roosters started in.

He followed Gramma through the screen door into a yellow kitchen. He wasn’t allowed to open the fridge without permission. A plate with brown eggs was perched on her steel counter. The grandmother opened a cupboard below the sink and pulled out a frying pan.

“Sunny side up?”

He nodded. He wasn't sure what she meant. Was she talking about the sun burning away the clouds?

“Wash up befoah kaukau, boy.”

He ambled down the hall to the bathroom and shut the door. He wanted to lock it but there was no lock. He faced the pedestal sink. Something bubbled in a glass on the dresser. He gazed through the bubbling water and saw two rows of teeth attached to bright pink gums. The teeth looked real and he imagined the old woman had the power to unlock body parts. He stuck in a finger, running it over the gums. They felt like plastic.

“Peanut!”

He pulled out his finger. He tiptoed and smiled big in the mirror behind the sink. The boy studied his baby teeth. They were as white as the puka shells he'd found at the point. He stared at the old woman's teeth. Gramma would die first. His father was next. Finally, it would be Mummy's time. He was pretty sure he'd outlive Troy. His heart would beat longer than anyone's and that's when he'd pack and move to the beach house. Crowing roosters, creaking floors, and thundering waves would remind him of that August he shared with his grandmother. He'd buy VapoRub and dab some on his chest before bed. The boy knew he would never be alone on the ranch—he could always make friends with the sea and everything in it.