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MANA

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Mana

Kirby Wright

PUKO'O WAS A DISASTER. The project was an eyesore with its sand and coral hills, stacks of diesel cans, and lava mounds from the ancient wall. The Sam Fong sign was riddled with bullet holes from passing motorists. My father threatened to sue Fong for missing deadlines. He was also furious because the construction boss had neglected to cut a trench that would have prevented storms from turning the highway into a raging river. It wasn't long before Fong waved the white flag and fled to Hong Kong with his mistress. Dadio took advantage: he purchased all the heavy equipment at auction, including dump trucks, end loaders, a crane, and the dredge. He rented the equipment to Matayoshi Limited, a Kaunakakai company the Canadians paid to mop up.



My big brother Troy and I continued our sojourns to Moloka'i on alternate weekends. I detested being alone with my father. It was as if he were a magnifying glass that focused the power of the sun on me. My weekend rolled around and soon I was flying over the channel with Dadio. Our Cessna sailed over a kiawe forest and touched down at Hoolehua Airport. I lugged out a box of tools for the dredge and my father cradled a roll of meshed polyurethane meant for his waterfall. His vision was to transform the fishpond into a sprawling resort with pools, tennis courts, and Polynesian bungalows. He quick-stepped toward the gates and I did my best to keep up.

My grandmother was waiting behind Gate #1 wearing her ranch clothes and cowboy boots. She had on her grouchy face. "Early, Buddy," she said.

My father's face was ruddy. "Pilot forgot our damn luggage," he told her. "Fo' the luva Pete," she frowned. "Wheah the bloody hell is it?"

"Back in Honolulu."

Dadio berated the counter girl, demanding our luggage be driven out to the ranch when it arrived. She paged our pilot and he reassured us the bags arrive no later than the next morning.

My father snatched the keys from Gramma and I followed him out to the lot. We stuck our supplies in the Scout's bed and Gramma slid into the cab. I

hopped up on the bumper and swung in my legs in as the engine roared to life. We shot out into the adjacent pineapple fields and I could smell the ripe fruit. I pressed my ear to the rear window: my father's rant about Puko'o was laced with foul words. My grandmother looked small and weathered. The wrinkles in her face went deep and her skin was the color of old newspaper. She pulled a cigarette from her pack, lit it, and nodded as my father cursed.



Lupe barred its teeth when we rolled up the incline fronting the beach house. My father climbed out and raced off for the pastures to inspect Valdez's work. Lupe jogged alongside him. Dadio had always been that dog's favorite, even though he rarely petted him.

I followed my grandmother in. She had me wait in the parlor and disappeared into her bedroom. She returned wearing a housedress made of thin yellow fabric and white terrycloth slippers.

"Nee help in da kitchen, Peanut."

I broke ice cubes free of their trays and poured kibble from a bag into a plastic garbage can. "Weak as a bloody cat," she said, handing me a pickle jar she couldn't open. I wonder if her decline coincided with signing over her land to my father in exchange for his promise of \$500-a-month. I figured she felt guilty for not splitting her ahupua'a equally between her boys.

Dadio joined us in the kitchen. "Your Valdez's is one lazy buggah," he told his mother. He rifled through the cupboards and gave Gramma a tongue-lashing for not buying enough gin. He scolded her out for being too lenient with Valdez. She remained silent. She'd told me his tirades were "just blowin' off steam" and said she'd learned the hard way never to challenge him.



After chop suey dinner on the lanai, we retreated in the parlor. This was the largest room in the beach house, one doubling as a living room and guest bedroom. It was decorated with an eclectic mix of art, everything from a copper Chinese cistern to hand-stitched murals of peacocks and roosters. A color TV played *This Is Tom Jones* against the far wall. I sprawled out on the pun'e that I once shared with Gramma and my brother small kid time. Dadio dropped into his Lazy Boy. He swilled a martini from a water glass, resting the glass on an end table with a marble top. Gramma sat on a cushioned chair on the western side of her picture frame window. Every morning, she'd camp here and survey the pastureland up to the red scar of road that led to her mountain house. I knew she didn't like me much because she felt my mother had spoiled me. She'd enjoy telling me stories about my father's horrific childhood when he wasn't in earshot, things he'd admitted during his boyhood summers with

her. Perhaps she felt that, by sharing these agonies, I'd wake up and vow to be more like him.

Gramma smoked through a chrome holder. She had to suck hard to fill her lungs with smoke because a filter captured most of the tar and nicotine. She made up for the lost drug by lighting up more. She tapped her cigarette against a copper can on the table and knocked the ashes off. "Why aren't you in da Olympics, Kirby?" she asked.

"I'm lousy at sports."

My father shook his glass and the cubes rattled. "Ha," he said, "I know the real reason."

"Wot's dat, Buddy?"

"Kid's gotta lazy streak a mile wide."

My grandmother dangled her holder down between puffs. "Heard yo' grades are terrible," she told me.

"I get 'Bs' and 'Cs.'"

"Don't you study?"

"Yeah, I study lots."

Dadio lifted his leg and farted. "No good college would want 'im."

"Christ, wot'll the keed do?"

"Be a clerk."

I sat up on the pune'e. "What do clerks make?"

"Nothing," Dadio answered.

"Isn't Mom's brother a clerk at Mass Envelope?"

"Yeah. That's why your Uncle Harold lives in a tiny apartment with no family and only a cat for company. He constantly begs your mother for money."

Gramma tapped more ashes in the can. "Puah Peanut won't have a pot to pee in."

They loved teeing off on me. I didn't know what inspired their humiliation game about me but I guessed it had happened to them when they were kids. It must have made them feel good running me down.

Gramma switched gears. She accused Troy of being "a pakalolo fiend" because his eyes were always glassy when he was up. "How's that big horse?" she asked, referring to my mother. She called my kid sis Jen "a skeleton" and said she'd heard the big horse dragged the skeleton all over town to shop. Dadio never challenged these attacks. Instead, he called Troy "a bum and a mahu" and my mother "a shopaholic." He told Gramma that Jen ate with her mouth open and "smacked her lips like a pig." Gramma sucked hard. She blew out a cloud of smoke from her nose and it rolled over the table.



Saturday was always barbecue day. My father told me to stand and watch over the hibachi after lighting the fire. The LA Rams, my favorite team, were

playing his San Francisco 49ers in the parlor. We'd just returned from Puko'o. Going to the project was excruciating because all Dadio did was hunt down problems. He'd discovered a dredge with a shattered steel jaw, drums leaking diesel, and that the ditch hadn't been cut deep enough to prevent run-off from leaking on the public road.



I snuck onto the lanai and peeked in at the game through the screen door. Dadio was gulping Miller High Life in his Lazy Boy while Gramma sat in her usual spot by the window. The 49ers fumbled and the Rams recovered. "Chrissakes," he said.

"That Brodie's got buttah fingahs," Gramma said.

"Go, Ramies!" I cheered.

Dadio turned. "I told you to watch that fire."

"It'll be okay."

"Get back out there."

"I can watch the game and the fire, at the same time."

"You heard me."

"Listen to yo' fathah, Peanut," Gramma warned.

My heart pounded. "The 49ers suck raw eggs," I blurted, "and so do you."

Dadio slammed down his bottle, flung open the screen door, and charged down the steps after me. I escaped through an open storm window as he charged for the back door. I fell when my rubber slipper struck a root. My father lunged at me but I rolled away and got to my feet. I sprinted through the naupaka. Lupe ran beside me down to the beach while my father plowed through the naupaka. He gave chase over the sand.

"Stop," Dadio said, "you goddamn coward!"

I quit running. I was fourteen and small for my age but the time had come. I spotted a thick kiawe branch lined with thorns, picked it up, and swung it like a bat. "Let's go, Dadio."

My father stopped ten feet away and was breathing hard. We were about the same height but he outweighed me by a good forty pounds. Most of his extra weight was fat, not muscle. His glasses slipped down over his nose and he pushed them back up. He looked vulnerable in an undershirt with holes, stained shorts, and old man leather sandals. He straightened his back. "Now put that down, Kirby," he said. "That's not a fair fight."

"You're bigger than me."

"Hit me with that and I'll lambaste you."

I swung viciously. "Come and get some."

He spun around and headed back.

"Look who's the coward now," I called.

He parted the naupaka and disappeared into the smoke rising off the hibachi. I stuck my slippers on a boulder and dug my toes in the warm sand. I ached for a showdown. I wanted to go back in time and beef my father when we were both fourteen. Instead of boxing or wrestling, we'd fight to the death in a steel cage. I threw down the kiawe, picked up my slippers, and headed east. Lupe came with me. The high tide line was marked by limu, shards of plastic, and broken shells. Sand fleas jumped up on my bare legs. I hated myself. If only I could run strong and feel free, unencumbered by self-doubt and unfulfilled longings. I wanted to be bright and worth something, not trapped between boy and man. I was half-man, a soul struggling to make sense of the world by learning how to fight back. I wished it was the 21st Century and my teen years were far behind me. Would I ever marry? I didn't want to end up alone and living by the sea. If I was meant to live a life without love, I vowed to move to a big city like New York so I'd be a stranger to everyone. Part of me had broken away from my father, the part that knew he hated me.

Lupe chased after a plover. The bird flew along the shore before heading out to sea. A cigar-shaped bar of sand lay warm and dry above the waves spilling over the reef. I knew the bar would soon be gone but I liked how it defied the rising tide.

I followed the edge of the ironwood forest east to Kainalu Stream, where a sand wedge dammed its mouth. An aquamarine channel reached into the harbor and cut through the reef. This was where fresh water seeped into the ocean and killed the coral. Sharks and ulua followed it to reach the small fish schooling in the shallows.

I waded out to the sand bar and gazed back as tiny waves erased my prints. I frightened a blue crab on the bar and it spread its claws. Here was the magic spot, the place my father had me drop my bait all those years ago.

I returned to shore. Lupe whined through his nose and trotted home. I put on my slippers and entered the forest. Needles and tiny pinecones crunched beneath me. I spotted a boy and a girl on the banks of the stream. He dipped his spear in the tea-colored water.

"No mo' fish low tide," said the girl, "only get crab."

"We go reef," the boy suggested.

I reached Chipper's shack, a collection of driftwood, irregular pieces of lumber, and corrugated steel panels orange with rust. He'd owned Hale Kawaikapu in the beginning but lost his kala chasing women and binging on booze. Gramma had made the mortgage payments from money earned driving cattle and weaving lauhala. The divorce papers had given her all the land in exchange for Chipper's life estate and enough money for a house. He'd built a cozy bungalow with bay windows but he burned it down smoking in bed.

I ducked under a laundry cord strung between papaya trees. The ax side of a pickax was stuck in the ground, the pick facing up. Coconut husks were scattered around. Chipper stood in a patch of jasmine wearing jeans and a green cap. His chest was raw from the sun. He held a rattrap in one hand and a hunk of coconut meat in the other.

"Howzit, Uncle Chipper?"

He studied the trap. "Tell Gramma dat tripe stew stay ono."

"Sure. Catching any rats?"

"Not yet. Gunfunnit mongoose keep stealin' da bait." He attached the meat to the barb on the trap's trigger. "Dat local outfit doin' good job Puko'o side?"

"My father says they're all lazy."

Chipper pulled a length of catgut from his pocket and wound it around the hooked meat. He cut the catgut by sawing it with his teeth. "Dem buggahs born lazy," he replied.

I said good-bye. I could tell part of my uncle wished he'd never left Gramma. I scurried past a dump that smelled like death and reached the old ironwood tree hunters used to butcher deer. I headed north through a pili grass pasture, crossed the public road, and entered a valley thick with kiawe. I found the stonewall that marked the eastern edge of our ahupua'a.

The pungent aroma of guava made me recall previous summers. I remembered hiking with my father and two boys named Mercury and Dodge. All of their siblings were named after cars, even the girls. The boys had led us up to the falls and hiked back down with us. They'd been great escorts. "Aloha now, boys," Dadio'd said when we all reached the public road. They'd watched us slip through the fence line and our mares amble over to greet us, including my father's prize Arabian. "I like one dollah!" Mercury'd called from the road, his fingers clutching the top strand of wire. "Me too!" Dodge had chimed in. My father'd stuck his hands in his pockets, pulled out the white linings, and said, "No mo' dollah." I had the urge to run ahead and return with money but lost my nerve watching my father march for the beach house with his head down. I'd heard a mare whine and looked back—the boys were pelting the Arabian with stones.

I followed the wall up. Clouds hid the sun. A stream raced by. The yellow lilikoi on the ground looked like tennis balls. I reached a web of ferns and pulled back on a frond. There, carved on the face of a lava boulder, was a petroglyph of a warrior. His body was thick with muscle and his legs were spread wide, as if he were claiming the universe. Rays of power erupted from each bicep and fused over his head. He was the Rainbow Warrior, a godlike fighter who'd never lost in battle. I envied his strength and power.

I asked the gods for mana.