

Bananas in the Banyan Tree

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To the Earth who waters my spirit
and nourishes my body.

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Huelo Homestead

Judging by his odor it had probably been weeks since Jonathan, the truck driver, had put on a fresh pair of clothes and now here I was stuck beside him as he sped around rental cars with disoriented drivers. The sour smell seemed to stick to the already heavy, humid air. Slowly, I started to get used to the BO, but that only made the damp mildew from the maroon Hawaiian print seat cover more apparent. I stuck my head out the window.

Moments before I had been sitting on the curb at the Maui airport with knees drawn up to my chest, squinting into oncoming traffic and searching for a red truck. When a grimy-looking guy, who turned out to be Jonathan, cruised up with his entire upper body hanging out the window of a more-than-beat-up red truck yelling, "Welcome to Maui!" at the tired travelers, I knew he was my ride. Up until this point, my life had been limited to American suburbia, but now we were headed to Huelo Lookout, an organic fruit farm tucked in the northeastern jungle of Maui, where I would work twenty-

five hours a week in exchange for food and a tent to live in - not the kind of vacation where you simply get away from life to enjoy the tropics.

Jonathan wore a black basketball jersey that looked like it was made for a girls twelve-and-under team. On a man six foot three it showed an inch or two of curly black hair on his navel. The jersey read "da farm," with a white net swooshing below the logo. His hair, licorice black, was matted at his nape and looked like it weighed five pounds. It was a true "drillit" – a combination of one huge dread that looked like a mullet.

"First stop is the water store," said Jonathan. "Can't drink the water on the island. It'll make you sick, so we have to fill up ten five gallon jugs to get us through the week."

"We're not going to the farm?" I asked.

"Nope it's food day in Huelo. I go out on a town run every Friday to get food and restock on water. By the end of the week, things start getting kinda scarce around here."

From there we went on to fill the propane tanks, buy groceries at Mana Foods, and various local fruit farmers. The Rolling Stones' version of "Let the Good Times Roll" mixed with the scratching sound of static played over and over. When Jonathan finally took the CD out it looked like it had endured through the high heat wash cycle and then tumbled through the permanent press cycle in the dryer. An equally scratched version of Bob Marley took its place. Through glossy, tired eyes I looked around and didn't see much difference between this town and the small town I had just left in North Carolina and suddenly I wanted to go home. I could find dirty, smelly men to ride around in beat-up trucks at home, but I didn't want to.

"Hey, you want da kine?" Jonathan asked.

"Da kind?"

“No, da kine,” he said, holding out a piece of fruit.

Black grit stained the pink around his cuticles and wedged beneath his untrimmed fingernails. I didn't want to touch his cracked and blackened skin.

“What is da kine?” I asked.

“Da kine means whatever you want it to mean. Like you can say, ‘Let's go to da kine store,’ or ‘Do you like da kine?’ It's an anything word.”

Da kine went against everything I had been taught about details and specificity in my college writing classes, and I didn't really understand the phrase, but I knew I liked it for breaking the rules.

“What's in your hand?” I asked.

“A lychee. It's a small fruit in the grape family. Peel off the hard, red shell before eating it and watch out for the big seed in the middle.”

Without touching his skin, I took the lychee and began peeling. Either my taste buds had forgotten what food tasted like (it had been eighteen hours since my last meal) or this was truly the most mouthwatering fruit I had ever had. I sat in the truck devouring the lychees, not caring about the rank smell, or that juice was dribbling into the crevices between my fingers and down my palms.

Deep greens whirred by the window as we wound our way into Huelo. I could hear the tires grip the road and release, while Jonathan tried to force the red truck to hug the mountainside. The gentle sway the truck made would have calmed my nerves if I was blind, but I couldn't peel my eyes from the double yellow paint marks the tires straddled. I sank lower into the mildewed seat when the speedometer hit fifty on a hairpin turn, at least it said fifty, but the erratic movements of the needle made me question its accuracy.

Not quite ripe banana bunches swung beneath the banyan tree that loomed over the farm's driveway. Jonathan bumped the closest bunch with the nose of the truck with more caution than he had when crossing over the rickety one-lane bridges. The everyday ease with which he did this reminded me of the used-to-be-yellow tennis ball that swayed in my grandparents' garage telling them exactly how far to pull in the car. I smiled and slid out of the truck. The air that greeted me wasn't thick like at the airport. It had been cooled by the afternoon rain and untouched by the heat. I was mesmerized by the gnats swarming the green bananas in search of a hole in the rubbery skin, but Jonathan's hand tugged my shirt sleeve toward the kitchen.

The warped and rotten plywood sank beneath my weight and I froze, fearful of falling through the floor. A kitchen in the jungle meant a tarp held up by rusty poles. Thick layers of spider webs laced their way between the toaster and spice rack. The mesmerizing image jarred me into my new reality – I had run away from my life – 4,430 miles away from an anxious menopausal mother, away from the pressures of modern American society, and away from every person I cared about. As my eyes tried to trace the spider's lace to its beginning, I thought about the college campus I just left and the lifeless textbooks I shoved into my armoire. The summer that stretched out before me held no deadlines to keep me pinned to my wooden library chair. I say my chair because for the last three years I have sat in the same chair, next to the "Bound Journals." When I graduate the chair is coming with me if I can sneak it out the door. The constant weight of the workers had worn the fabrics on the chairs in the Huelo kitchen, and the metal holding them together had begun to corrode.

The crank of the engine and the sound of tires crunching beneath the gravel snapped me out of my daydream.

“Where are you going?” I shouted, as I ran after him.

Jonathan waved and slipped out of the driveway. Without thinking, I dug my foot into the gravel and kicked, sending rocks through the air. Looking down at my maroon suitcase, my toes curled beneath themselves and I rocked back and forth anxiously. Without an explanation Jonathan left me there in the middle of the jungle.

“What the hell?” I yelled at the empty space where Jonathan disappeared, “You can’t just LEAVE me here!!!”

I paced the length of the kitchen no longer caring if a floorboard snapped, in fact, I wanted it to break, flip the table over and run away from there. When a girl with long curly brown hair sauntered into the kitchen she caught me scavenging through the leftover granola and chips of raw noodles that were scattered over the barren cupboard shelves. Anna didn’t look like the postcard Hawaiian beauty lounging on the beach wearing a grass skirt and flower lei; instead thin yellow and orange paint squiggles danced across her homemade tank top and a crusty clump of mud was smudged across her forehead, yet something told me she didn’t mind the mud.

“Don’t worry, it’s food day in Huelo,” said Anna, from the hammock hanging outside the kitchen.

“Yeah, but Jonathan dropped me off and left with the truck AND the food!”

Her laugh was warm and well-meaning, but I felt betrayed and abandoned by Jonathan. Glaring at her, I sat down at what I presumed to be the kitchen table beneath the graffiti; automatically my fingers began tracing the symbols that had long since been

illegible. The chill of her cool fingers on my forearm made my skin crawl, but when I turned toward her there wasn't the look of ridicule on her face that I expected.

I hadn't even been set-up in a tent, but Anna took the liberty of showing me around and finding an open one. The grass on the front field felt like thick straw beneath my feet and my toes were wet from the condensation that had collected during the rain shower. Expecting to see leftover clouds lingering in the sky, I was surprised when I looked up and didn't even see a hint of an overcast day. The field gave way to a patch of young banana trees that overlooked the valley and the ocean blurred with the horizon in the distance.

With the sun beginning its tilt toward the west Anna hurried me along. "When the sun goes it's gone out here," she said. "There's not much to do at night and I wouldn't think getting settled in the dark would be much fun."

It wasn't until my shoulders began to ache from the weight of my luggage that I noticed how tired I was. The gravel on the path that zigzagged through the Tent Village slid beneath my feet, which quickened the pulsing rhythm in my exhausted limbs. Ahead of me, Anna rambled on about the happenings of the farm, but I was too focused on trying to keep my balance to care. Something slick with moisture brushed my face, instinct kicked in and my hand swatted in the direction of the offending object before I even raised my gaze to see what it was. The culprit, a dropping branch of a banana tree wasn't what caught my eye. The thick mass of vines created a wall in the jungle – it was the sturdiest wall I had seen since leaving the airport. The maze of brown was never ending and appeared to follow the same nonsensical path the spider web had. Beneath my fingers, the vine felt cool and smooth despite its ruff appearance.

The bright orange tent tucked away at the end of the trail was mine for the summer. Anna disappeared leaving me deposited in the jungle. Broken shards of colorful glass littered the entrance, but they had been worked into the dirt and looked like they could have been there for several months. It didn't take long for me to realize the jungle is timeless. Dust and other grime clung to the nylon; pieces of it floated off when I knelt down to unzip the door flap. Inside, were hints of nesting from previous dwellers - a shaggy piece of carpet served as a doormat, a rusty fan that no longer had the willpower to circulate air, and an air mattress with a slow leak. As I set to make this piece of orange nylon my new home, I found a yellowed copy of "Collected Poems" by Chandrika, an outdated native Hawaiian poet.

When darkness settled into the jungle, my luggage was half unpacked and I hadn't eaten a meal in twenty-four hours. Too tired to get up, I fell asleep to Chandrika's words: "The music of my life is dancing me/ I feel like a puppet/ in this symphony."

Travel on Instinct

I thought I'd sleep in after my marathon travels and mosey my way up to the kitchen right before work at noon. It was a good idea in theory, but the roosters started going off at 4:30 am and the nylon that separated us wasn't enough to muffle the constant crows. Rolling over to let the opposite car endure the racket felt like the natural thing to do, but that presents a problem when you're snugly zipped into a fitted sleeping bag.

The bag rolled with me, but only partially and the zipper was now beneath me and my pillow was off to the side. This might not present a problem for most, but for someone obsessed with symmetry it's impossible to fall back asleep knowing that you're unbalanced and misplaced. I squirmed and wrestled with the bag until I finally got it back in place. As soon as my head hit the pillow, another rooster crowed, which caused a chain reaction among the other roosters and I felt my face flush from a combination of the sweat I worked up while tossing in my bag and the desire to kill every rooster in Maui.

At 5:30 when I walked up to the kitchen, Jonathan was already there ready to greet the day wearing the same "da farm" jersey from the day before. He was getting ready to make banana bread, but his progress stopped due to his uncontrollable urge to play air drums with wooden spatulas. The anger from him leaving me in the kitchen

yesterday evaporated as I watched him. Something told me he had been away from normal society for too long.

It took me minute to figure out what the faint slapping noise was that pulsed with his movements, it was his "drillit" rising and falling against his neck – I shuddered, but it turned into to laughter. The silent rhythm he jammed out to came to a halt when he caught me leaning against the banyan tree laughing. Two spatulas flew through the air toward me. I caught them. While Jonathan fidgeted with the stereo and flipped through CDs, I shook my head and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Whatcha doin' up this early, kid?" Jonathan asked.

"Can't sleep. Are the roosters always this loud?" I asked.

"You won't get used to them, but you will get used to moving with the Earth. You will learn to sleep when she sleeps and wake with her in the mornings."

"What's there do to around here?" I asked. "I've got like six hours to kill before work."

"You should check out the bamboo forest!" said Jonathan. "Just hitchhike up to mile marker 7 and hike around in there. It's gorgeous!"

"WHAT? Hitchhike?"

"That's how we get around out here. Don't worry it's easy and you'll get used to it!"

I stared at him blankly. Hitchhiking was out of the question. The only hitchhikers I had ever seen were bums holding soggy pieces of cardboard reading "Help the Homeless" or "Hungry on the Streets."

“Or you could walk. It’s only two and a half miles up the road,” he said, reading the blank expression on my face. “You just have to trust your gut instinct. If someone pulls over and you get a bad feeling just don’t take the ride and wait for someone else to come along.”

The Beatles’ song “Hold Me Tight” filled the room and Jonathan was back air drumming and twirling around the room. Seconds later, he grabbed my arm, trying to make me join him, but I shuffled backwards. Every time the chorus sang, “hold me tight,” he attempted to lure me into his dance. By the end of the song, four spatulas waved through the air not looking anything like drums, our feet carried us in mismatched directions, and we sang at the top of our lungs not caring if we sang in tune.

After our early morning dance session, I headed toward the bamboo forest, but only made it about a mile up the road before a white fifteen passenger van pulled up beside me.

“Hey! Hey! You want to walk?” the driver yelled out the window, “I said, do you want to walk?”

“I like walking,” I said, my voice shaking. All I could think about was the future headline announcing my death: “Girl Gets Murdered in Maui.”

“You sure? Come on. I’ll give you a ride. Where you going?” the woman yelled “You’ve never done this before have you? Come on.”

I looked at the woman and was surprised to see a plump middle-aged native decked out in a cheap Hawaiian print shirt.

“Climb on in. Wait, you don’t have a gun do you?” she asked. “Never mind that question. You’re not the gun-type. I can tell.”

The driver asked me a few basic questions, which I answered truthfully. I kept my eyes straight ahead, too scared to look around. When she picked up something from her lap my head involuntarily turned to see what it was. It was a microphone, but before I could even think of what to ask her she stared through the rearview mirror and introduced me. I spun around in my seat only to meet the eyes of two elderly couples – all of whom were smiling and grinning.

The newspaper headline in my head changed to “Five Tourists are Kidnapped!” But my fears were put to ease when the driver started rambling about Hawaiian culture; I was on a tour bus.

It wasn't long before my skepticism toward hitching dissipated and I actually looked forward to meeting whoever was nice enough to pick me up. I got used to being picked up by grubby looking men in beat-up trucks; actually I even preferred rides from these middle-aged men because of their tendency not to fill the air with bullshit. Instead they were silent. I imagined them picking up a hitcher as their one good deed for the day – their way of keeping karma in check. Rides came in all sizes ranging from school buses, tourist buses, rental cars to old pickups. It became a game between the other farm workers and I to see who could snatch the best ride fastest.

My best ride came from a tow truck-driver. I heard the truck pulling up the mountain long before it peeked around the last corner. Andrew, another farm kid, shook his head as he walked by seeing my thumb stuck out to the tow truck.

“You'll never catch it,” he hollered.

It was impossible to tell if the driver was slowing down for me or if the steep grade was suspending him. I smiled and waved, trying to look as innocent as possible.

“Are you going all the way to Hana Town?” the driver shouted out the window.

I grinned and climbed in. The claim for this being my best hitch isn't solely due to the unlikelihood of him picking me up, but because the height that the truck lifted me off the ground and allowed me to see the rainforest from a bird's eye view.

By the end of the summer I forgot Jonathan's advice of not just taking a ride because someone was willing to stop. I threw instinct out the door and hopped in with whomever pulled over. One of the last rides I got was with a Mexican who barely spoke English or so I thought.

“You have ID?” he asked, before I even climbed into the truck.

I nodded now suspicious and uncomfortable.

“You buy beer for me?”

I told him no, but got in anyway. A group of us from the farm had been camping on the beach the night before and spent the day snorkeling. When they were ready to go home, I lingered in Pa'ia Town so I could go to the internet café. By the time the man picked me up all I wanted was to get home and get cleaned up. In my hastiness, I didn't take time to care who drove me no matter how uncomfortable they made me feel.

Twenty minutes into the ride he pointed up a gravel road and told me he lived there and I responded by telling him not to go out of his way and to let me out. He kept going. At the next reasonably populated place I told him I lived there and to pull over. My breath came out in jagged gasps, but they only quickened when the car finally stopped at the back of a parking lot.

“You have nice...” his hands gestured at where his breasts would have been if he were female.

“Excuse me!” I yelled.

“You have nice tits. Can I taste?” he lifted up his shirt.

“WHAT? Are you serious!”

He stared blankly.

“Get the hell outta here and FUCK OFF!” I screamed.

With all of my strength I slammed the door, but the poor old truck couldn't handle the force and something came loose that wouldn't allow the door to close all the way.

The door flapped a few times as he reversed out of the parking space and I silently hoped it would fall off on the highway. I walked the remaining miles home, not wanting to talk to anyone, much less trust them.

I don't know how many dozens of good rides I caught that summer, but I quickly forgot my initial fear of trusting strangers. There are only the three seconds it takes for a car to slow to a stop to decide whether or not to take the ride – you literally travel on instinct when hitchhiking. Without instinct there isn't anything to rely on other than the goodness of strangers, which isn't a bet I'm willing to take.

Half-Truths and Complete Lies

About half of the work on the farm is running an organic fruit stand along the historic Hana Highway. Considering I had just escaped a dead-end bartending job the idea of playing happy customer service worker didn't appeal to me. Huelo Lookout Fruit Stand makes and sells fruit smoothies, crepes, banana bread, coconut candy, and fruit. All it really took was a smile, common sense, and the patience to answer the tourists' questions.

"How long have you lived in Maui?" an overly smiley tourist asked.

"Three days," I said.

"It's not possible that I've been here longer than you!"

"It's true. I just moved in and haven't adjusted to the time change," I said flatly.

"Then how did you know how to give me directions to Twin Falls?"

"Cheat sheet," I said holding up a laminated piece of paper.

All credibility was lost by telling the truth, so I tried a new approach with the next sun-burnt and bug-bitten tourist.

"I've been here for almost three years now," I said this time with a genuine smile.

"Does your family own the farm?"

“No, I actually dropped out of college and decided to move here.” My grin was widening along with the length of my lie.

“I bet your family loves to visit! What a great excuse for a vacation!”

“I haven’t seen them since I moved out here, but it’s too crowded in my tent for visitors anyway,” I said peeling the skin off a mango.

“What? You live in a tent!”

I’m not an advocate for lying, but it made the time I had to spend with the tourists go by quicker because I never knew what story I would find myself telling. It allowed me to get lost in a new reality where the details of my made-up past had as many possibilities as my unknown future. There was the occasional group of grandparents that made me cringe with guilt as lies slipped through my teeth, but they all had it coming to them one way or the other. There were really only two kinds of tourists: the naïve and the stupid. The naïve were uninformed, but willing to learn about their surroundings. I told them simple half-lies mixed in with a few whole truths, but I gave the stupid what they had coming to them – complete lies. Stupid is a term I don’t use loosely, but these individuals lacked all common sense and weren’t inclined to hear anything I said except what they wanted to hear.

“Are those wild chickens?” a woman yelled from the passenger seat of her 2008 Suburban rental.

“Well, they don’t appear to be in a cage.” I couldn’t help my sarcasm. “But don’t worry they’ll run from you.”

“I’m going to stay in the car just in case. Can you crack a coconut over here so I can watch?”

I climbed out of the fruit stand and walked toward the chopping block with a coconut in one hand and a machete in the other.

“Do you know how to use that knife? I bet your mother worries to death about you chopping off your fingers,” she said, never shifting her gaze from the machete.

“My ma is the one that taught me to use this. Her brother lost a couple of toes to one of these things, so I think she’s beyond worries.”

Most Americans from the mainland don’t recognize the slick egg-shaped outer layer as a coconut because all they’ve seen are the hard round balls labeled “coconut” in the grocery store. When a machete rips through the outer fibers of a coconut, it makes a tearing sound, but once the fibers have been ripped away the machete starts clanging against the shell.

After watching me hack away at the nut for a minute and recovering from the image of people losing fingers for the sake of coconuts, the lady in the Suburban yelled to her husband, “See I told you she was a native Hawaiian!”

Not only did she provide me with a lie, but it was such an outrageous lie that I wouldn’t have even considered telling it. Although my lackluster German skin tone had been browned by the sun, it wasn’t close to the deep brown of the Hawaiians. My sandy hair had been lightened by the sun, making it not quite blond. Native Hawaiians don’t have sandy blond hair.

“So you’re Hawaiian?” her husband asked.

The lies started tumbling.

“This is my family’s land. I’ve been working this fruit stand since I was twelve and I love it.”

“And I suppose that boy over there is your brother,” he said, pointing to Julius, my Slovakian friend working on the farm.

After telling the couple Julius was my cousin, I hurried them on their way before they overheard his thick accent and broken English. The man obviously doubted my story, but I heard the woman jabbering on about how “neat” it must be to have lived in the jungle my whole life.

I started calling these little lies “realized fiction.” Like everything else in my pretend world, I made it up and defined it as the process of making myself into a fictional character. In some ways I was my own imaginary friend when I told stories about being a runaway who fell in love and moved to Maui. In one day I could be a college dropout *and* a graduate neglecting her degree. The list of characters I became was long: starving artist, farmer, hippie thriving on psychedelics, tour guide, and surfer. I even got to be an orphan. Doesn’t every kid genuinely want to be an orphan at some point during their childhood? As a kid, I spent an abnormal amount of time singing songs from *Annie*, pretending to be her best friend. So why not play the orphan card for a day?

“How long have you lived in Maui?” asked an unsuspecting tourist.

“As long as I can remember,” I said.

“That must mean your whole life. You’re still pretty young, kid,” said the man.

“Maybe. I don’t know where I’m from.”

“What do you mean? Didn’t your parents tell you where you were born?”

“I don’t have real parents. I was adopted.”

He stared blankly at my emotionless face. If I could have worked up a few fake tears, I would have, but it was everything I could do to keep from doubling over in laughter because the truth is, I'm not a good liar.

I became these things not only to the tourist, but to myself. It started with boredom and lies told to entertain, but there was one truth I couldn't deny – nobody knew my story. The freedom this gave me was incomparable, but after a while I became less and less sure if I knew who I was.

Sadness is an emotion I learned to stifle when I was four-years-old. My father and I were fighting the ageless “brush your teeth” fight. I must have said something sassy because he spun me around on the stool, gripped his pink hands into my shoulders and yelled, “Who are you? You're not my little girl anymore!”

Like every toddler that gets into trouble, the tears started swelling up, but tears only made things worse for my father. As he shook me, I could feel the pressure of his dull nails through my thin Litter Mermaid nightgown and right then I decided to never cry in front of him again.

I have only seen my father a handful of times since he moved out when I was thirteen, so in some ways I've felt orphaned from him. Did that make me an orphan? Of course not in reality, but thoughts like these are how the lines between the truth and lies began to blur in my mind.

In the seclusion of my tent, I fabricated the lies even further in my journal. With each story I took on a new name and a new history and like actresses who become emotionally attached to their role, I became attached to my personas. Although I

connected with these fictional characters, I was able to wake up in the mornings and laugh at the fake woes of the night before.

A Sleeping Mother

The jungle became black at night; the thick vined canopy boxed out the moonlight. The trail from the kitchen to my tent only took five minutes to walk – in the daylight that is. I had only been down the trail once before attempting it at night. Within the first few steps my right foot slid on the gravel. I caught my fall, but jagged black lava rocks stabbed their way through the flesh on my hands. Seconds later, my left foot found its way off the path and down the bank leaving me in an awkward straddling position and a mud stain on my shorts. Some of the small specs of dirt launched through the air from my slip-n-slide method and stuck to my moist lips and left a mineral taste in my mouth. While trying to spit out the grit, something rustled in the leaves and I froze. Hoping whatever was out there didn't see me.

The image of a thick snake slithering between my feet wouldn't leave my mind. My heart quickened. I probably only stood there for a minute or two, but I felt frozen in time. When I began the trek again, every step was premeditated: I pointed my toe downward and nudged it on the ground before transferring my body weight and taking a step. It was a tedious process that made me blunder through the brush even more. When I

finally reached my tent, my feet were soaked from dew and mud and the little flecks of rock that pierced my palms began to sting.

In the following days I receded into my tent at sunset, fearful of the trail. I memorized every crevice before attempting it again. Standing at the trailhead, directions ran through my mind: go down the trail, sharp turn to the left, root, tree, dip in the trail, veer to the right (not too far), another root, pass the hut, trail narrows – stay to the right, root. I saw the whole thing clearly with my eyes closed, but as soon as they opened all I saw was blackness. Over time I became less fearful and expected to stumble my way home. I walked with arms outstretched to avoid being smacked by tree branches and tangled in spider webs.

On the first night I managed to make the journey from kitchen to tent without veering off the trail or any other slip-up, relief washed over me. I grabbed my water bottle and made my way back, but it became apparent that I only knew how to go *down* the trail in the dark. If it is possible to fall up a hill, then I surely did.

Once in the kitchen, I looked down at a thin stream of blood that had trickled over my palm and dried. The flowing tears that streamed down my cheeks seemed to mock the already crusted-over blood. It wasn't the pain from the cut on my hand causing the tears; it was the frustration of not being able to walk from my "bedroom" to the kitchen.

Suddenly a pang of homesickness flooded me. I wanted the familiarity of my bedroom and kitchen. Up until then there wasn't a time when I had gone so long without sleeping my third-generation bed frame that stood three feet off the ground. I must have been one of those kids who couldn't keep still, even in their sleep. One of my earliest and most consistent memories is the feeling of being slapped awake by the tug of gravity.

Mid-fall, cool air jarred me into consciousness. The hollow sound of my bare back smacked the wooden stool and filled my ears. The sound really depended on the angle my body made contact with the wooden stepstool. I quickly learned that a faint pop meant the bony center of my back hit the wood, but a muffled thud meant my side took the blow. A scream always followed the impact, then the pad of my mother's rhythmic footsteps, the door handle clicked open, and finally she let out a guttural grunt as she picked me up and soothed me back to sleep. A bed guardrail would be an easy fix to this problem, but I refused it by throwing nightly tantrums and my mother gave up the fight.

Now, as I stood at the top of the trail for the second time that night, over twelve years since I last fell out of bed, I suddenly wanted the security that only mothers know how to give. I slid my way down the first half of the hill and sat there refusing to get up until I figured out what had changed. Why could I do it once, but not a second time? Somewhere in those dark minutes it occurred to me that I hadn't thought about the trail when I had done it a few minutes ago – I hadn't worried about falling.

As a kid I could walk from room to room in my childhood home in the dark. My sock feet knew which stairs to skip because of their creak. I could wiggle my way through the living room knowing my little brother's shoes were probably left in front of the TV. Despite my mother's nervous obsession of moving furniture around, my knee never rammed into the corner of the marble coffee table. From shaggy carpet leftover from the 70's in the living room, to the newly installed linoleum kitchen floor, my feet knew to skip over the mismatched piece of wood that separated the two because of its tendency to leave splinters in the offenders' heel. The crevices of the house had been built into my subconscious.

With thoughts of home running through my mind I stood up, ready to attempt the trail again. Suddenly the trail had a slight feeling of familiarity and my senses became more engaged when I imagined trying to tiptoe around a sleeping mother. If I was going to be comfortable with walking through the jungle without a light, then I had to treat its roots like shoes that needed to be stepped over. Pretty soon I abandoned my eyes all together and relied on what the trail told me. The crunch of the gravel told me I was still on the path. When the grass and leaves tickled my ankles, they warned me to realign myself with the trail or I'd soon slide down the bank. With comfortable images of my childhood running through my head, the jungle became less intimidating and more like tiptoeing around my sleeping mother.

Bare Bodies

Under most circumstances I would refuse to follow a naked stranger into his house. As Tyler guided me inside, I was only vaguely aware of being uncomfortable. At the time I was more focused on watching his butt cheeks tighten and relax, despite the noise in my head telling me not to stare.

Tyler and his nudist girlfriend, Adrianna, rented the jungle shack “next door” to me on the farm. Like the rest of the farm, their dwelling was primitive. There were no walls within. The bedroom area gave way to a makeshift living room, which abruptly became the kitchen at the other end of the “house.”

The house didn’t have furniture. Mats of varying thickness were placed on the floor where the bed, table, and couch would have been. A piece of notebook paper was duct-taped to the floor at the entrance and read, “Please remove footwear, Mahalo!”

Adrianna bent over the stove, wearing only a pair of navy blue bikini bottoms. Like the paper doll pictures in fashion magazines, she had a perfect hourglass figure that made her waist the focal point on her almost-naked body. When she turned to greet me, my gaze followed a sweat bead that slipped between her small A-cup breasts. Again I had

to peel my eyes away and force myself to find her face. Her cheeks were salmon pink against her caramel skin tone.

“Do you want some taro?” she asked.

Taro is a root similar to potatoes, only slightly more tasty and purplish in color. It is a Hawaiian staple that is made similarly to mashed potatoes, but mixed with coconut water instead of milk. The quality of a taro dish is gauged by thickness, which Hawaiians traditionally eat by scooping their index finger into the pot.

As we sat on the floor licking our fingers, I outlined their bodies in my mind making sure to take note of how their legs folded beneath them, the crevices in their collarbones, and how their lips tightened and relaxed with every syllable. Adrianna was pushing thirty, but the tightness of her skin reminded me of a young girl who hadn't gotten used to the changes that come with puberty. Tall and lanky is how I'd describe Tyler's stature, but the strong curve of his back looked like a backwards “C,” which made his belly push out unnaturally.

Instead of being uncomfortable with their bare bodies, I suddenly felt overdressed. They lived in Maui and didn't have any tan lines that I could see. It seemed unnatural and reminded me of the “fake bakers” on the mainland who spent hundreds of dollars in tanning beds.

That night I stood naked in my tent wondering if I could give up the comfort and secrecy that clothing offered. Tan lines crisscrossed over my back, slid over my shoulders, and left perfect triangles on my chest. I folded my clothes and tidied up, lounged on my air mattress, reading and writing in my journal just to see how it would feel. Although I was completely alone with no chance of being seen, my attention stayed

focused on my nakedness. Instead of highlighting my bare breasts, the tan lines acted as a different type of cover-up that just so happened to be see-through. Looking down at the white marks around my bust I felt embarrassed. It was as if the lines were signs of innocence and virginity, two things I no longer had.

As the days stretched by, I watched Tyler and Adrianna harvest vegetables and hunt, wash dishes and cook, all with bare and imperfect bodies. Lived-in bodies, claimed and broken-in bodies, forgiven bodies, casual bodies that were content living outside societal norms. The longer I watched them the more I wanted to join their nakedness – to stroll from my tent to their shack bare, free-spirited, and unconcerned.

“Adrianna, have you always been this comfortable?” I asked, one afternoon.

“I haven’t always been a nudist if that’s what you’re asking.” She shifted her yoga position from balancing on her right leg with her left foot pressing into her thigh, to something that resembled a triangular position and continued. “Ever been to a nude beach?”

My attraction to Adrianna wasn’t sexual, curiosity more than anything attracted me to her. The way her breasts shifted when she leaned to one side mesmerized me. They weren’t big enough to flop over and rest against her ribcage, so they always looked perky unlike my D-cup bust that needed the extra lift of a bra.

It wasn’t long before I found myself with Adrianna at Little Beach, a small cove off the north shore reserved for locals. We stood on The Perch looking down into the crowd. Young, old, skinny, fat, beautiful, and wrinkled bodies danced around in varying states of nakedness.

The towels were spread out just like at any other beach and Adrianna wasted no time stripping down. I sat down in my bathing suit wondering if I would actually do it.

“Want to go for a swim?” Adrianna asked. “Or are you just going to sit there looking like a bewildered kid?”

“I’ll catch up with you in a bit,” I said.

“Here’s the rule of thumb of a nude beach – you can look, but don’t stare.”

The thought felt dirty, but I looked anyway. An old man snoozed on his side near me, exposed, yet covered in sand and in the fetal position. This pose gave him a look of young innocence and made me think that no matter how old and callused we get, it is possible to hold onto a little piece of youth. A little girl of five or six, completely bare, ran from one cluster of people to another giggling and showing off something clasped in her hand. She didn’t have a bashful bone in her. A middle-aged woman sang and swayed beneath a banyan tree letting her saggy breasts move wherever they pleased. Back and forth, back and forth, she seemed to be searching for something she lost – maybe she was remembering her grown child that no longer drew nourishment from her nipples or maybe the thought was of a lost lover who used to pull her into their arms or maybe she recalled her own mother rocking her to sleep or maybe it was none of these. Sitting in my shield of cloth, I thought of my own overprotective mother and wondered if she rocked herself back and forth in the shower trying to shed her own secret pain.

“Hey, you want some?” sang a lighthearted voice behind me.

A woman in her thirties with curly brown hair and olive skin sat down beside me and held out a joint. Ripples of cellulite made gentle indentions on her thighs and she seemed not to notice or care when she dug her fingers in the sand and sprinkled it up her

legs in a zigzag motion. Instead her attention was on watching me contemplate my surroundings and her offer.

I took the herb and inhaled it, smiling at how joints were passed like cigarettes among Hawaiians.

“New here, huh? I remember what it was like,” she said and walked off grinning. But before she got out of earshot, she hollered over her shoulder, “The ganja will help.”

My fingers fidgeted with the knot on my suit, not entirely convinced to untie it, but not willing to leave it alone either. With eyes closed, I tried to meditate and block out any thoughts by focusing on my breathing - inhale through the nose, exhale from the mouth. I undid the knot and let the fabric sag against me. I was sweating from the heat and my nerves and the sudden breeze tickled my moist skin.

My bathing suit top looked useless in the sand next to my feet. The thirty foot walk from towel to ocean couldn't have lasted long, but the water in front of me felt like a mirage I would never meet as I weaved in between bodies. The combination of the loose sand and my tense muscles made my footing shaky and unsure. I tried not to look at the people I passed hoping if I didn't look at them, they wouldn't notice my bareness.

The water lapped around my ankles, instantly cooling me off and leaving goose bumps on my skin. With each step the ocean overtook me: knees, waist, and finally breasts. I dipped beneath the water and floated with the current. Saltwater seeped through my teeth when I tried to suppress a laugh beneath the surface. I came up sputtering and giddy with disbelief that I was actually topless at a nude beach. With my back to the shore, I watched a wave swell and gain momentum. With arms outstretched, I braced

myself for the blow. The frothy wave stung my sun-burnt face when it slapped me; I collapsed into the waves' force and tumbled with it until we both ran out of energy.

In the ocean it was easy to forget about my insecurity. It was easy to flirt with the waves and allow them to caress my unrestrained breasts. It was even easy to float on top of the water next to Adrianna, but it wasn't easy to emerge from the ocean and face the crowd on the beach. I could feel tension building in my muscles as the sand beneath my feet got firmer. As I looked around, fleshy curves greeted my eyes and again I thought of their broken-in state and the fluidness of their movements.

From what I could see, they held no judgment against their own bare bodies or the ones that weaved around them. The only obvious judgment being made was the one I held against myself: I wasn't perfect, there wasn't enough muscle definition in my legs, my abs didn't even hint at the idea of a six pack, and it seemed as though old ladies would forever be pinching at my baby cheeks.

Upon each trip to Little Beach, it got easier to spread out in the sand and let the sun dry me, but in the months that have passed since I came back to the mainland, uneasiness returned even in the solitary minutes spent drying off after a shower.

Three months after getting back from Maui, my roommate and I spent a long weekend at my grandparents' lake house in Georgia. Standing on the edge of their two-story boat house, I wanted to jump and feel the water caress every crevice of my body without the constraint of my bathing suit getting in the way. It was somehow okay in Maui where clothing could more easily be spotted in the sand than on bodies.

Looking up from her book, my roommate smiled and called me a chicken, thinking it was the jump I was afraid of. In response I took off my bathing suit top, got a

running start and screamed until I plunged into the water. When I came up she was leaning over the railing, laughing hysterically.

“No way!” she yelled. “I thought you got over your nudity phase in Maui!”

I smiled and slipped beneath the surface. For the rest of the afternoon I comfortably swam with my bare, imperfect, broken-in, lived-in, forgiven, and claimed body.

Maui: A Memory

My college astronomy class failed me; in Maui, I couldn't find the familiar constellations that were easy to spot in North Carolina. Orion and the Big Dipper weren't shining beacons in the mass above me. Instead the Milky Way shone across the sky like a car's high beams stretching down the highway. Lying in a field between rows of sugar cane, dull inescapable pain swelled somewhere inside me as I thought of the comforts of real life: family and friends, my dog, my bed, clean water, privacy, and a mosquito free house. In order to reestablish some of these comforts my friends on the farm and I started calling ourselves a "farm-ily." I had seen many members of my initial farm-ily leave our Maui-family to return to their real ones and I had said many bittersweet goodbyes, but it was my turn to leave this home to return to a different one.

For the most part, the Kahului airport didn't have exterior walls because of the comfortable year-round climate. I stood watching Jonathan's red truck disappear not far from where I initially sat on the curb waiting for him three months ago. Tears swelled and eventually dropped down my face and felt like they were carving their way through my skin. The next few minutes were a physical and emotional blur – with puffy eyes I struggled to see the numbers on the plane ticket that guided me back to the mainland and

my mind struggled to form a concrete visual of my family anxiously waiting in the airport right where I left them. Three flights and fourteen hours later, I didn't have to conjure up outlines of their bodies and I was grateful to have spotted them before they saw me. I lurked behind a corner watching, not quite ready to be bombarded by hugs. They looked awkward and out of place among the bustling travelers – they weren't travelers. The last time I remember my mother going anywhere was to Quebec over a decade ago.

I waited until she looked in my direction to walk into view. Relief filled me when my mother pulled me into her arms, but she smelled of perfume and lotion. The smell was too clean for my nostrils that had grown used to dirt and grime. I must have smelled of soil and campfire, black beans and rotten fruit. It had been weeks since I put on a truly fresh pair of clothes since going to the Laundromat was both a luxury and a lengthy task. Thoughts of Jonathan swarmed my head as I thought about the coconuts we passed between us taking turns gulping down its water.

Cars, trucks, and more cars blurred past my backseat window on the way home from the airport. The noise and chaos of Atlanta's city streets made me want to recoil into the woods, into relative solitude. The excited stories that burst out of my mouth sounded foreign. Maybe it was because I knew they would never understand that the time I spent at Huelo Lookout was a series of connecting and disconnecting that broke me down before building me back up. They would never get why it was okay for my clothes to be dirty or why I'd rather have rice and beans for dinner instead of my mother's homemade spaghetti sauce and garlic bread.

"Since when do you not like beef?" asked my mother.

She turned her nose up when I gave an explanation about greenhouse gases, fertilizer, and antibiotics.

“You are becoming un-American. I wonder how long this will last,” she said.

Before we could have dinner, picture showing and more storytelling, she scooted me off to the shower like only mothers can. The bathroom door somehow became intimidating through the notion that I was willingly putting myself into box. Suddenly the comforts I had longed for felt suffocating. The shower curtain hovered around my browned body putting me into an even smaller container. Every room in the house reminded me of stacked Tupperware and the shower was the smallest plastic container that made up our house. Not only would hose water been sufficient, but it would have also felt more natural to be lathering up on the side of the house. Needless to say, I scrubbed and got out as quick as possible.

“How was your shower?” my mother asked.

She ignored the grunt I replied with and continued, “I bet that was the most refreshing shower you’ve ever had!”

I didn’t hear the rest of what she said. My mother can give a long-winded monologue without realizing her audience stopped listening in the opening line. Instead I was thinking about how much cows like fruit. There was a cow pasture across from the fruit stand in Maui and everyday at 5:30 they would come up to the edge and wait for us to throw our rotten fruit over to them. With the first thump of a heavy pineapple, the cows’ call grows louder and they stamp their hooves seemingly demanding more. I wanted to be flinging fruit through the air to the cows instead of sitting in a sanitized kitchen.

Later that night, I grabbed a coffee mug from the cupboard and gazed into it, looking for creatures. My fingers swiped the cool inside half-heartedly hoping to feel leftover grime that the last person forgot to scrub out. My mother stared at me from the other end of the kitchen, watching my movements like I was an awkward neighbor instead of her daughter. I knew she wanted to ask why I picked a coffee mug when there were rows of sparkling clean glasses. Instead of answering her silent question like I normally would, I let the sound of my clammy, but freshly cleaned feet peeling off the hardwood floor fill the silent space between us.
