

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 yo'a 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 tats."

"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 coladas 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.