

Banyan

Molly Giles

Jane flexed her neck, rotated her shoulders, and looked up from her guidebook as the plane dropped through the clouds to the Big Island. She could see Mac and Mia, four rows ahead of her, Mia's tousled head turned toward the window, Mac's long legs stretched out on the aisle, both still asleep. How did they do it? Jane could never sleep when she traveled, too much to take in, too much to think about, but her lover and her daughter had crossed their arms and closed their eyes the minute the plane left Seattle five hours ago. They were going to miss their first glimpse of the volcano! She pried a macadamia nut from its package, aimed at Mac's neck and watched him start, rub the spot where it hit, then lean over and touch Mia's face to wake her for landing.

The old lady beside Jane snorted and Jane waited, expecting the snort to turn into one of the nasty low laughs she had been subjected to throughout the trip, but her seatmate only pointed to the open guidebook. "Romantic Hawaii!" the chapter heading gushed, "The perfect place for your dream wedding!"

Jane, shamed, snapped the book shut. She did not want her fantasies, mundane as they were (Mac proposing to her over mai tais, Mia radiant with approval) mocked, especially by this crazy witch. She was used to lunatics seeking her out and sitting beside her—she had some sort of unholy radar that pulled them right in—and this creature, decked out in stained sweats and hiking boots, carrying an ancient Shiatsu in a bamboo cricket cage, had focused on her at once, settling down with a rush of incoherent mutterings. Her long white hair had a burnt electric stench and the long nails on her wrinkled brown hands were filthy. She had refused to move when Jane needed the restroom and when Jane, forced to step over her, had tripped, she had chuckled. During Jane's absence, she had drained Jane's gin and tonic. Her dog, a horror of bristles, whiskers, snot and drool, had growled at Jane the entire trip and now, as the plane taxied into the Kona airport, began to snap toothlessly at her from its cage. Jane let her own lip curl back, then rose with relief as the seatbelt lights went off. She gathered her things and made her way down the aisle.

Mac and Mia were already out the exit door and Mia, on the tarmac, was already bent over, clutching her midriff while Mac, helpless, patted her back with his big hand. Jane quickened her steps to catch up to them.

"The wounded bird act," Jane explained.

Mia moaned musically, almost, if you weren't used to it, Jane thought, convincingly.

"She always does this," Jane explained, looking into Mac's worried face. "She's thirteen years old and this is how she travels. What is it, honey?" she asked Mia.

"I have a temperature," Mia said.

Jane pressed a hand to Mia's forehead. It was damp, fresh, cool as a petal. She bent and kissed it, feeling Mia's startled retreat. "You're fine." She looked up to see Mia's pretty pout reflected in Mac's new aviator sunglasses—huge, expensive, ridiculous glasses—why on earth had he bought them? At forty-five, Mac was still a good-looking man, tall and broad-shouldered. There had been no need for him to dye his hair, bleach his teeth, and yellow his skin with self-tanner for this trip. He looked like a gigolo. Of course there had been no need for her to get Botox injections, scarlet lip gloss, and a new cropped haircut either. No wonder Mia feels sick, Jane thought; she probably doesn't want to be seen in public with either one of us.

"Are you sure she doesn't need a doctor?" Mac asked.

"Positive. Smell the air!" Jane added brightly. "All I could smell on the plane was dog farts and old lady. But Hawaii smells like flowers."

It did. Flowers and coconut oil, ripe fruit and salt air. Alone at the carousel, Jane reclaimed their luggage, raised her head, and smiled up at a misty rainbow over the airport. She watched Mac drift over to a lei stand, choose a spray of plumeria, and drape it over Mia's bent neck. It was just like Mac, a landscape architect, to go to the flowers first, and she smiled, then winced as Mia, consistently bad-mannered, hunched her shoulders, hugged her elbows, stared at the ground, and sneezed. It seemed Mia had given up on Lyme Disease, mono, multiple sclerosis and leprosy for this trip at least, and had settled on a simple cold. Good, Jane thought. She could deal with a cold.

"You said it would be hot here," Mia complained. "I'm freezing!"

"I'm on fire," Jane countered. And her face, glimpsed in the window of the rental car as she slid inside, did look flushed and puffy, her hair spiked in damp strands, her nose shiny. An unwelcome shaft of heat shot through her as she slammed the door shut and tugged wrinkled silk off her sweaty chest and thighs.

"You all right, sweetie?" Mac, turning to back the car out, patted Mia's knee. "You need an aspirin or anything?"

"I can't take aspirin." Mia moved her knee aside and opened another of the enormous vampire novels she had been reading all summer.

"She chokes. Oh look!" Jane pointed to a second rainbow arcing across the sky.

The ocean glistened gray on one side and jagged mountains rose green on the other. The island was less lush than the guidebook had promised and had an arid clarity she had not expected. As they pulled onto the highway she saw the old woman with the dog. She was wearing

a sequined visor and sunglasses and her long brown thumb was crooked out to hitchhike.

"Don't stop!" Jane warned, but Mac was hitting the radio buttons to find a station Mia liked and didn't even look up. Jane slid down in her seat as they passed. When she raised up, the woman was far behind and the road had opened onto a moonscape of lava rocks with messages and hearts outlined on them in white coral. *U N I 4-EVAH*, Jane read aloud. She reached over to press Mac's hand. He pressed back and she relaxed. Things had been strained lately, with her heavy caseload at the law firm and his recent lay-off, but they would be lovers again, she knew, once they were alone.

But they were not to be alone. When they got to Kona, they found there had been a mix up and only one room was reserved for them. A holistic health conference had taken over the entire hotel and this was the last room available, the manager told them. "We'll go to another hotel," Jane decided.

"I can't afford another hotel," Mac reminded her. Jane dropped her eyes. The flight, the food, the rental car were all her treat. She had wanted to pay for their lodging too—the trip had been her idea and she made more money than Mac—but Mac had insisted. It was, he had said, the least he could do. It was also, Jane knew, all he could do.

"The room is big." The manager, a large, honey-colored Hawaiian woman, stretched her arms wide. "You'll like it. Two beds. Family style."

"No family I ever," Jane began, but Mac took the keys and Jane and Mia followed him up the elevator to an airy room overlooking the roofs of other hotels and the ocean beyond. The two queen sized beds were within hand-holding distance and as Jane shook her head, Mia, sneezing dryly, threw her things down on one of them, rummaged through her duffel bag, and locked herself in the bathroom.

"It's fine," Mac said. "We'll take it."

"But we won't be able to make love!" Jane could not keep the disappointment out of her voice.

"We'll just have to be inventive. Mia will be down at the pool, won't she, or out at the beach? Every teenage boy on the island will be offering to teach her to surf."

"Mia won't surf."

"You'd be surprised what she might do once she gets the chance. I might even teach her myself," Mac said.

"I thought you were going to teach me."

"You too, if you want."

He turned on the huge television, preset to a video about the island's volcano. "Kilauea's still erupting," he whistled. "Look at that." His

bleached teeth shone unevenly below his dyed mustache as he whistled again, and Jane, following his gaze, saw Mia emerge from the bathroom in her new bikini. "You look dangerous, sweetie," Mac said, and Mia, with a filthy look toward Jane, sneezed again.

"You going to join us, Mom? We'll be down at the pool." Mac held his arm out to Mia, who stepped forward lightly.

"No. 'Mom' is going to stay here by herself," Jane snapped, "and watch TV all afternoon."

No one heard her. Mac's pleased voice faded as he led Mia down the hall. Alone in the hotel room, Jane opened her suitcase and threw her new lace lingerie into the back of a drawer. She reached to turn the television off, but the image of Kilauea caught her. It looked exactly like a black heart with red blood pouring out. She picked up Mia's discarded lei, sniffed it—why hadn't Mac bought her one too?—dropped it, and began to pace, her own heart beating faster and faster. She knew why Mac hadn't bought her a lei, hadn't sat with her on the plane, hadn't noticed her new haircut. In the last few weeks, Mac had changed. He had changed toward her and he had changed toward Mia. He had always treated Mia with amused indifference—his girlfriend's spoiled kid—but recently he had offered to help Mia with homework, had picked her up from dance class, taken her side in disputes over dishes and laundry. He had remembered her birthday with a pair of tickets to a rock concert, seemed almost comically disappointed when she invited a friend and not him, and had forgotten Jane's birthday altogether. His cheerful bedtime complaints about his bad back, bad knees, and leg cramps had sanitized their sex life and he had been "too tired" to even celebrate their two-year anniversary last month.

A familiar yip sounded from the hotel corridor and Jane froze as the Shiatsu shot past the open door. Was that evil hag following her? Wasn't this supposed to be the "big" island? She slammed the door shut with the flat of her hand, leaned against it, then sank to the floor, pressing her face to her knees. She'd read *Lolita*. She'd seen both versions of the movie. As an attorney, she'd defended child victims and she'd prosecuted child molesters. Nothing like that was going to happen here. She would just have to be careful. Very very careful. She put on her own bikini, turned off the television, and joined the others at the pool.

They went swimming, sunbathed, walked along the sea wall. As night fell, they sat on a green bench near an enormous banyan tree, watching Japanese tourists take pictures of themselves and listening to the clamor of the nesting birds above. "This tree," Jane remembered from her guidebook, "came from India hundreds of years ago. They call it the strangle tree because it can't stop growing. It sends out so many roots it ends up strangling itself."

"Dark and shady back in there," Mac said. "Looks like a good place

to hide from the island police and smoke a little *pahalo*."

Jane stared at him. Had he lost his mind? *Pahalo*? Mac never smoked marijuana, and he loved trees. The first time she had seen him he had been arguing with construction workers who were planning to take down an old oak outside her law office. But now he only smiled at Mia, tugged his dyed mustache, and didn't give the huge tree another glance. Mia, leaning against Jane's shoulder, sniffled piteously, swung her slim legs and didn't look either.

When the streetlights came on, they continued to stroll, cruising the art galleries with their airbrushed blue whales and smiley dolphins, the gift shops with their koa wood bowls and plastic grass skirts. They ended up in a New Age crystal shop. While Mia examined the soaps and lotions and Mac fooled with a "native" drum, Jane studied her charges. Mac was trying to show Mia how fast he could drum. Mia's indifference was heart's ease to observe, but that was because Mac was too new at this to know how to seduce her; you don't rope children in with things that interest *you*, Jane thought, you go after children with things that interest *them*. She watched his sad blink as Mia moved away. It would do no good to accuse him of being in love with her daughter; he'd be shocked; he'd deny it; he'd say she was crazy. And Mia would be equally horrified. Mac, she'd protest, was old enough to be her father, the father she hadn't seen since she was six, the father who never wrote or sent gifts—why would she want someone like him?

Someone snickered behind her and Jane swung around to see an old woman pass through the doorway. Setting down the tray of dyed shells from the Philippines she'd been sifting through, she watched until the woman disappeared in the crowd.

That night Jane lay awake listening to the surf, the trade winds, the call of the doves. Lonesome, she rolled over to kiss Mac, but he inched away, his body cool beneath the sheets. After an hour, she slipped out of bed, went to the desk, turned on a small light, and finished reading the guidebook. She had already learned the history of the islands—all that trickery, cruelty and corruption—so tonight she read the legends. She read about the miniature Menehune and their fish ponds, and about Maui, the boy who caught the sun with a fishhook. Finally she read about Pele, goddess of the volcano. Whenever anything annoyed her, Pele blew up. She didn't listen to excuses, apologies, or promises; she never held a trial, prosecuted a criminal or defended a victim; she simply erupted, efficient and brutal, and lava'ed everyone to death. You had to respect a temper like that, Jane decided, closing the book. Pele might have ended up alone, but she ended up satisfied.

She looked over at the two sleepers. Mac's arm was stretched toward Mia's bed and Mia's round brown shoulder was exposed. As she pulled Mia's sheet up, Jane saw a scrap of faded cotton quilt—Mia had secretly

packed her old blankie, the blankie Jane had made for her when she was a baby. Jane smiled and bent to kiss Mia goodnight. As she inhaled the familiar drugstore odors of watermelon and strawberry in her daughter's hair, she smelled something else, bright and new, a sour trace of womanly sweat. She dropped the sheet and slipped back into her own bed, moving Mac as far over to the wall as she could.

The next morning Mac suggested they go snorkeling. It would be "a serious experience"—when had he started to talk this way?—and Mia would see all sorts of "outrageous" reef fish—she might even see a barracuda. Jane marveled again at his innocence as Mia predictably said, "No way." They drove to a black sand beach and Mia spread a towel out, plopped down, and closed her eyes, her box of unused tissues beside her. Jane picked up the huge book Mia had been reading. "Valdred parted the silken bed curtains and growled with blood lust at the sight of Delphia's pulsing purity." No wonder Mia felt sick, with garbage like that in her head. When had she stopped reading *Little House on the Prairie*? While Jane was off trying molestation cases? Trying to make enough money to pay their mortgage and buy their groceries?

She put the book down and sat hugging her knees. A solitary woman in a rusty black one-piece bathing suit stood waist-deep in the water, pulling a mask on over her face. Jane remembered snorkeling years ago, in Mexico, with college friends, the fun it had been, and after a while she picked up her own mask and snorkel and followed the other swimmer into the ocean.

It was still fun. The shallows flickered with bright butterfly fish, wrasse, and parrotfish, and the sound of her own breathing through the tube was intimate and encouraging. At first she stayed in the shallows, but something sweet, slow, and shadowy drew her deeper and she saw to her delight that she was only inches from a large sea turtle, his mild eyes and mossy beak guiding her silently through a boulder garden studded with corals. Hidden underwater, she relaxed her vigilance. How safe and peaceful it was down here! She swept soundlessly into the warm currents, her hands opening wide to wing her forward. Silver bubbles broke as the woman in the black suit splashed ahead, leading her out deeper and deeper. I could stay down here forever, Jane thought, and the desire to do just that startled her so that she surfaced with a kick and struck for shore. She was just in time to see Mac on his knees looming over Mia's bare back, tenderly applying sun block. Neither looked up as Jane dripped toward them. At the other end of the beach, the woman in the black suit emerged from the surf and pulled off her mask, releasing a cloud of white hair as she snatched up a small dog and crabbed off toward the parking lot.

"Pele's here," Jane said.

"Someone you know?" Mac asked.

Jane stared after the woman, then squatted down on her towel and groped through her bag for the guidebook. "Pele," she read out loud, "vengeful goddess of the volcano, often appears in the guise of an old woman with a white dog. She can often be seen hitchhiking along the highway. She lives deep inside the Kilauea Crater and accepts offerings at its rim; she is said to be particularly fond of cigarettes and gin."

Mia turned her head, eyes closed. "What's she vengeful about?" Mia asked.

"Her lover was a pig god," Jane explained. "And one day, when Pele was visiting another island, he seduced her younger sister."

Mia made a pretty face and arched her back. "Yick. Pig god."

"Oh, they're not a bad sort." Mac capped the sun block lotion. "Once you get to know them."

"She roasted him on a spit, served him at a luau, turned her sister into a pineapple, and had her canned," Jane improvised.

"Right. And you just saw her."

"I see her all the time. She's everywhere."

Everywhere was intolerable and every day got worse. They went to the City of Refuge, where early Hawaiians had fled to escape the wrath of their kings, and Mac said wouldn't it be nice to live in a place like that, outside the law, where you could do anything you liked, with whomever you wanted. They went to a sacred altar at the tip of the island where King Kamehameha had been born, and as Jane frowned at the roughly carved birthing stone, Mac picked flowers for Mia's backpack. They drove to the Palolu Valley Lookout and while Jane photographed the view, Mac photographed Mia.

On and on it went. Mac wooed Mia and Mia sniffled and read her book and Jane was sad and mad and hurt and could not show it because—what was the point? What could she do? If she spelled out the obvious she would ruin everyone's vacation; if she simply sat on her feelings she would only ruin her own. On the next to last night, after a romantic sunset dinner at the guidebook's favorite restaurant, where, instead of asking Jane to marry him, Mac raised his mai tai and said, "To Mia's first time in Hawaii, may there be many more," Jane pleaded a headache and walked off by herself. Mia wasn't in danger. Mac would never rape her. He loved her too much to harm her. Jane had never had anyone love her that much. Had anyone ever loved her at all? Mia's father, for a while. Mia herself, for a while.

Wearily, drearily, Jane drifted through crowds of tourists and locals, stopping at a grocery store for a bottle of gin, not even minding that the old woman who sold it to her had white hair and an ancient Jack Russell asleep on a straw mat. When she passed the huge banyan tree, she ducked and went in.

It was a hideous tree, with its dangling gray vines and ridged roots

intersecting in haphazard connections. It was dim and musty inside and seemed wild with invisible bird life. Jane sat down, drank straight from the bottle, and looked up at the crazy web over her head. It seemed that anything that wanted to could grow here, in any direction. It was like Hawaii itself, she decided, with its easy philosophy of acceptance. Under this tree, everything was possible, everything was permitted. A middle-aged man in love with a thirteen year old girl? No problem. A jealous mother hallucinating goddesses? Welcome. Everyone was welcome here. For a while. And then the tree gave out, gave up, had to, died. It could only accept so much, because so much was unacceptable.

On their last day they went to the crater. They had already gone to see the lava spill at the sea, the thin streams of red pouring over the black rock, the dramatic puffs of steam as fire hit the waves. But Kilauea itself, Mac said, was something to save for the end. Things worth having, he said, were worth waiting for. He gave a brave false wink to Jane as he said this, as if willing her to think he was referring to sex, sex with her, which had not happened all week and would probably never happen again. "You seem distant," he said, glancing at her as he drove. She nodded without answering. They had entered the rain forest at the base of the volcano. Yellow ginger and royal purple princess plants tumbled over each other in jungle profusion, crowding out the older native foliage around them. Mac turned the radio up—rap music—and said over his shoulder to Mia, "Do you dig this, sweetie?" but Mia, in the backseat, had her headphones on. She hadn't said anything except the usual, "I don't feel good," since breakfast.

"I don't dig it," Jane said. "If you care what I dig."

"Of course I do." Mac clicked the radio off. They curved up the Crater Rim Road and started through the lava fields. It was a new landscape up here, totally different from the flowering green jungles below, a high vast plain of pewter-colored rubble pocked with cracks and crevices of smoke. Jane watched a frigate bird soar through the warm gray air over the lifeless plateau and took in a shallow sniff of sulphur, then another, its dark eggy odor weighting her lungs. Her throat felt crowded with short hot bad words; her eyes burned; her pulse twitched. When they came to the end of the road, she turned to Mia.

"Want to come see where Pele lives?"

"I can see it from here." Mia turned a page of her book.

"Mac?"

"I'll stay with Mia."

"Not if I can help it." Jane heard her voice break and saw her face reflected in Mac's sunglasses. This tense, tight-lipped woman was his girlfriend? No wonder he preferred the daughter. Who wouldn't? She got out alone, slammed the door, and started up the path.

The air smelled of sewage and the loose lava tinkled like glass beneath

her feet as she climbed to the top. Offerings to the goddess crusted the rim of the crater: sea shells, coins wrapped in ti leaves, cigarettes, dried leis. She crouched to set her own offerings down: the half-empty bottle of gin, the guidebook. She straightened and stared into the great smoky hollow, which was, as she knew it would be, empty. An empty socket that stared blindly back at all who stared blindly in. Nothing there. Never had been. It was tempting to give a great roar and spread her arms and jump in, incinerating with rage as she dropped to the bottom. Tempting too to turn aside and hold on to this rage, to let it smolder as she grew older and angrier and more and more bitter. She glanced over her shoulder at the rental car in the parking lot. Mia's pale face shone in the back seat and Mac was a large shadow slumped over the steering wheel. They looked alone, unconnected, and almost—she hesitated—asleep? She could see Mia's hands folded against her cheek, pressed to the window, Mac's big shoulders rising and falling in rhythmic slumber.

Is it possible, Jane thought, that I've been the only one awake this whole trip? She waited, braced for a breath of rude laughter. But the crater was silent. She started back toward the car and got in. "We were worried about you, Mom," Mia said, stretching, "you were gone so long." Mac nodded, yawned, and started the engine. Silently, they drove down the long loop of the grey mountain road. As they took the last curve, they passed an old woman bouncing in the back of a pickup truck driven by two bare-chested island boys. Her baseball cap was askew on her wiry white hair, her muumuu billowed, her dog barked from her lap, and her eyes glowed like hot coals. She grinned straight at Jane with her toothless mouth and waved. Jane, turning to watch her recede, saw a thin flow of lava begin to pour from the pierced heart of the mountain. By the time they reached town, it had diminished to a simple line of moonlight and when they flew home the next morning it was nothing but haze on the ocean. Still, Jane knew it was there. She would always know it was there.