



In slow procession the giant trucks came up out of the darkness and the ghostly radiance of the moon, were filled and moved off downward toward the mill, miles away at the sea's rim...

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I tried to talk Charlie out of going to the beach. But it was his last day of freedom—it could be years before he got to spend time by the ocean with me and our little boy, Christian.

“Let’s go to Polihale,” he said, knowing full well how much it would upset me after what had happened to me there as a child.

“How about Salt Pond Park?” I said, as I put the last dish away in the cupboard. “It’s safer for Christian. They have that nice breaker and—”

“I’m the one being hauled off to prison this evening. It should be up to me.”

“All the more reason why we should go to the park. It’s closer to the airport, where you’re meeting the marshal. You’ll get more time with me and Christian.”

I could see from Charlie’s expression that I should have left the “me” part out of the equation. I could envision the wheels turning in his head as he weighed the prospects of me getting my way, even if it meant something better for him. “Okay,” he said at last. “Come here little fella,” his

arms extended. “Daddy’s gonna toss you into some humongous waves today, Bud.”

Christian dropped his ball and ran to Charlie. As their arms meshed my heart sank.

I felt like the odd person out. Charlie Owens is a *haole* and he and Christian have fair, white skin. But, fortunately, the resemblance ended there. Charlie had foggy-gray, foreboding eyes, while Christian’s were bright, an unusual army-uniform shade of green, like my daddy’s.

While I’m not pure Hawaiian I’m about as close as anyone these days. My mother was mostly Hawaiian with a hint of Chinese, and my daddy, well; he was a hint of lots of things.

I didn’t like the idea of Charlie taking Christian into the “humongous waves,” but I didn’t say anything. I told myself, *It’s his last day of freedom for heaven’s sake. Give him a break. He wants to be with Christian.* I tried to convince myself this was the right way to look at the situation, but I wasn’t buying it.

I hurriedly finished making sandwiches; the kind Charlie liked best—ham and cheese on rye with mustard and lettuce, plenty of lettuce and no mayonnaise. I tipped over the mustard, cut myself slicing the cheese.



“You will be careful,” I said, as Charlie got out of our Ford Fairlane station wagon after a short drive to the beach from Hanapēpē. Even though it was a white-hot day, a shiver went down my spine as Charlie unfastened Christian from his car seat. I couldn’t control myself. I wished those straps had been made of steel.

I tried to calm myself, but I couldn’t. There was nothing in my life that was more precious to me than my son. I wanted him to have a chance to grow up strong and healthy without the sort of misery I had to face as a child.

I counseled him, long before he could understand the words, *“E nānā mai i ke ala a’u i huaka’i ai, he wahi kukui nō ia no kou ala e hiki mai ana / Look upon the path I have traveled to light your road ahead.”*

Christian and his dad went off playing by themselves, kicking a beach ball across the sand, as I put down the

mat. Christian usually stayed near me, but when he had a chance to play with Charlie he lost track of boundaries. Usually, he carried around a little stuffed gecko, which we Hawaiians call lizards. Aunty Fay had made it for him. Today he hurried off without asking for it.

When I finally caught up with them by the swings, I said, "Charlie, please don't take Christian out into the water. The surf's up and the water's full of jellyfish. You know Christian's allergic. A bad sting could kill him."

"Don't be ridiculous," Charlie said. He kept pushing Christian in the swing, as though nothing I ever had to say made any difference. There was a tattoo of a snake that came up Charlie's thigh to his abdomen and I could see it coiling and uncoiling when his muscles flexed. He pushed the swing higher and higher with his scrawny arms, arms covered with black curly hair that matched the thick hair on his back and chest. Dark stubble masked his unshaven face. There was enough grease in his ducktail to form an oil slick. It's hard to imagine that I had once found this man sensual.

Christian began to cry. "He's got sand in his eyes," I said. A steady Kona wind blew from the south and brought everything loose along with it. Nearby palm fronds rustled like crumpled paper.

Charlie stopped the swing. "I think me and this young'n'll cool ourselves off with a little dip." He led Christian towards the water.

I caught up to them and grabbed Charlie's arm. His arms were thin, but his sinew was strong. I was no match for him, even though I am tall and athletic. His strength reminded me of piano wire. I remember hearing in school about how many tons you could hold up with a single strand. He shoved me away and, while I could have protested further, I gave in to feelings about how I should try to make this a nice day.

I asked Charlie to stay in the shallow water where two other children were trying to trap florescent orange and blue minnows in a glass-canning jar. Christian waded into the water, which came up to his navel and slapped it with his palm. He helped the other boys herd the fish into a corner of the pool where they could be caught. One of

the boys lurched at the fish with a bucket, but they were too quick for him and he missed them.

After a short while Charlie picked Christian up and put him on his shoulders and traipsed over a sandbar into the deeper water. They played a game where Charlie would collapse and toss Christian into the crashing waves. I stood at the ocean's edge and watched helplessly, hopping back and forth from foot to foot and fretting with each new jellyfish sighting in the water. A few months earlier Christian had come out screaming with a mouthful of water. But now he was used to it and reveled in the game almost as much as Charlie did. Charlie liked that. He wanted Christian to be as tough and reckless as he was.

"Better start him out early if he's going to learn to ride a hog," Charlie would say, as he wheeled him around our backyard on the handlebars of his custom made Ellsworth motorcycle. I don't know which Charlie was prouder of, the length of what he had between his legs, or the high gloss of what he put there to ride on. I dreaded the prospect of the day when I'd watch Charlie peel out of the driveway and tear down the road with Christian on his handlebars.

Standing on my tiptoes, I could see blue floats that looked like tiny cellophane balloons—bluebottles. There weren't many, but I knew how dangerous the tentacles of just one of them could be, especially to Christian. Once I'd seen a small tan and white beagle carried from the water by his frantic master, tangled in those tentacles of death.

My biology teacher at the University of Hawaii had referred to them as the Portuguese man-o-war. "Their poison will only sting an adult," he'd said. "but it can kill a dog, or a small child."

I'd seen his prophecy come true with the poor dog. First his breathing became weak and erratic, while he yelped in pain. Then, his breathing slowed into stillness, his yelp, along with his life gradually wheezed to a sickening halt.

I don't know if I heard Christian scream first, or Charlie yell, "Man-o-war!" I could see Charlie trying to brush the tentacles from around Christian's stomach. Our *keiki* had turned bright red, tears gushing down his cheeks.

I ran into the water to meet them. "Don't pull off those tentacles," I pleaded. "You mustn't pull off the tentacles."

The tips will keep stinging, if you don't get every tiny bit of polyp!"

Charlie pushed me away, but he quit trying to tear loose the polyps. We ran up the sandy beach. A crowd gathered and someone offered us a towel. Charlie put Christian down. He bawled uncontrollably.

"Pee on him," I said.

Charlie ignored me, and resumed pulling at the glossy-white tentacles. I fought with him, but he kept shoving me back.

"Get away from me, bitch," he said.

"Pee on him," I begged. Charlie shoved me again, and I grabbed his arm and bit it. He got up, doubled up his fist and hit me across the cheek. I reeled and dropped to my knees. The crowd just watched. No one lifted a finger to help me.

I came up behind Charlie and hit him in the ribs with my elbow, like a basketball player in the paint. I thought I heard something crack. He picked up a handful of sand and threw it in my face. "Piss on you, you crazy bitch!" he hollered. He picked up his towel and his keys and marched towards the station wagon, leaving me and Christian to fend for ourselves.

I checked the faces in the crowd to see if I could pick out someone who might help, but they all had the blank look of owls staring at a crescent moon. Completely humiliated, I pulled down my bikini bottoms, squatted and peed on my son's wound in front of God and everybody. Finally an elderly gentleman, wearing a captain's cap came forward and held Christian's hands and arms back, so I could hit my target. I squatted until I couldn't pee another drop. In a short while the poison became neutralized. Christian's pain began to subside. In a few hours, I knew he would fully recover. My husband, on the other hand, had left me forever.