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- Special thanks to members of the KCC community who helped in the production of this issue of Diamond Journal, especially the following: Wini Au, whose continuing generosity and kindness we appreciate; Gene Phillips, whose advice and patience we value; Edna Keaton, who came to our rescue with invaluable advice right before Diamond Journal went to press, and Raymond Yuen, the layout wiz, who assisted us and kept us believing that layout really is "a piece of cake."

- Thanks also to the KCC faculty who encouraged their students to submit, especially Kathy Chang, Leigh Dooley, Chris Hacskaylo, Gail Harada, Lorna Hershinow, Phoenix Lundstrom, Frank Noji, James Robinson, Meena Sachdeva, Sylvia Spalding, and Shr Ward.

- Finally—and most importantly—Diamond Journal thanks all the writers who submitted their work for consideration. Your effort along with your creative writing talents continue to make Diamond Journal possible. Because we had so many excellent essays to choose from, selecting essays for publication was no easy task. We wish you success in all your future writing and hope you will consider submitting once again to Diamond Journal.

- Diamond Journal is produced and published by students of Kapi'olani Community College, with funding provided by the Board of Student Publications of Kapi'olani Community College. Submissions and correspondence should be addressed to Diamond Journal Adviser, Language Arts Department, Kapi'olani Community College, 4303 Diamond Head Road, Honolulu, Hawaii 96816.
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Filial Piety
Theresa Au

Filial piety in Chinese culture is very important. It seems since the day I was born my parents were well-prepared to educate me concerning this concept. I lived in a house full of extended family members. I lived with my grandmother, several uncles, aunts, and cousins. We were very happy. We never felt lonely. My grandmother was the most respected member in the family. Everyone was afraid of her. At that time, I was too young to understand my mother's feelings. I didn't know whether she was happy or not, but the children like me were very happy. It seemed like every night was a party. We always had more than ten people eating together. The most important thing I learned from this small society was unity. My family taught me that to break one chopstick is easy but to break ten chopsticks is difficult. We should also respect and obey our parents. I thank them for giving me a chance to live in this wonderful world.

When the Vietnam war started, our small society was broken up. My parents brought the family to Hong Kong. From then on, we lived as a nuclear family. Our family lifestyle was guided by my parents. They set up a pattern for us to follow. For example, we were not allowed to date until we graduated from high school. Of course, they had to approve of the person we dated. When we were allowed to go out, the time we had to come home fell under the family rules.

One time, I broke the rules. I came home around one o'clock one morning. My family could not sleep. They were all worried about me. When I got home, I saw everyone sitting in the living room trying to decide whether or not they should call the police. Since that time, I always came home on time. I knew their reaction showed how much they loved me.

After I married my husband, my father and mother-in-law lived with us part of the time, and the rest of the time lived with my sister-in-law. We got along very well because I was trained by the small society to tolerate them. I decided that when I had children, I would follow my parents' ways to guide them. It worked out well for me. But after I emigrated to Hawaii, the world changed. I was told that, as parents, we should respect the children's ideas and should not punish them. Instead, we should use a friendly way to make them understand what they did wrong. My parents only had to use a few minutes to spank me and I was able to remember my lesson for the rest of my life. Sometimes, I would spend the whole day talking to my children.

It seems that things would not turn out as easily for me as they had for my parents. I was unwilling to raise my children in the American way, but in Hawaii I was told to teach my children to be independent. Children should not depend on their parents and parents should not depend on their children when they are old. Children should be independent after eighteen. This method seems to break the family into small pieces. Growing up, I know that if I were in trouble, even in the worst situation, I was able to go to a safe shelter, my home, my family. Now in America, we are able to depend on the government for assistance by, for example, applying for social welfare. The whole nation's problems are passed on to the government's hands. The government not only needs to resolve the diplomatic problems but also has to resolve millions of the nation's people's problems.

If the Americans can accept the concept of filial piety, then senior citizens would feel they are more valuable. They have the duty to take care of their grandchildren. The advantage of this is that the old people will not feel helpless and useless, sitting in the park all day long, or have to go to daycare centers. The young couple will have more free time for themselves, which may decrease their stress from taking care of their children. Divorce cases may be eliminated. This may create more peace and harmony.

I looked up the meaning of the name of our country—the United States. It seems that the nation should be united. The first step to unity is to start from the family. We can see the communists used new ways to rule their country. In the past forty years, most of the nation has lived under their shadow and was unhappy. During that time, you rarely saw a smiling face in the streets. Everyone seemed to be suffering and fearful. The government brought up the children by sending them to the communes. After forty years, the communist system has changed, because they were going against the rules of nature by breaking up the relationship of the family. I look forward to the day when all Americans talk less about independence and more about family structure. For me, the meaning of independence is to pass the nation's personal problems on to the government.
I came to the U.S. as a refugee; however, I had never thought I would have to flee from my former native country.

Living in Viet Nam under the Vietnamese communist ruling, life was very hard for everyone. There was no justice, no laws that would protect citizens, no good education, not enough food for the country and almost no hope for citizens to prosper. People, known as "boat people," were fleeing across the ocean for it was the easiest way out of the country. The rumor was that it was better to die fleeing than to live under the terror of communism.

So, in 1987, my mom told me to flee with a few friends. I started out in the morning to meet with our group and we all began to depart toward the Cambodian border. By nightfall we reached our destination. We slept there overnight in preparation for the next day's adventure. At 5 a.m. we left and went to Phnom Penh (the capital of Cambodia). After eating lunch there, we went south toward the ocean to get a boat out of Cambodia. At about 8 p.m., we arrived by the ocean side. We ate dinner and waited for the right time to get on the designated boat. We finally left Cambodia at 11 p.m.

The boat ride was very scary because the boat was small and there were too many people in it. I was so afraid that I wanted to cry, but I couldn't even make a small sound. Every minute that passed by was like an eternity in hell. I knew I had to live and I prayed very hard for the freedom that I had always wanted. Even though there was fear in me, there was also a sense of relief and freedom because I finally realized I was no longer on Vietnamese soil. The trip was long and the weather was bad. It rained and it was cold. After 16 hours at sea, we finally were seen by a big Thai ship that came to our rescue. They took everyone up to their military ship and gave us food, blankets, and first aid treatment. Then the ship sailed back to Thailand. After a day's enjoyable journey on the big ship, we reached Thailand. We were given instructions to fill out the proper paperwork to get into a refugee camp. We did all that. Then we were given a bus ride to the camp. Thailand had beautiful scenery that helped reduce our fear level.

When we arrived at the small camp, we were surprised at the overpopulated conditions. Anyhow, I had to survive with the poor quality accommodations provided by the camp. I stayed there for 17 long months before I came to Hawai'i in September of 1989. Now looking back on those times, I can never forget those hard days I spent in fleeing Vietnam as well as the days in the Thai refugee camp.

I do thank God for everything that I have now and I feel sorry for those boat people who were less fortunate than I. May the God of light help out as many people as possible who are in need of freedom, liberty, and justice.
Who Am I?

Jie Zhuang

I am a traditional Chinese woman. In my heart, my family—my husband and my child—are always first. My entire life is run around this center.

There are three people in my small family—my husband, my daughter, and me. My husband is a general manager of a factory in Hawaiʻi now. He came to Hawaiʻi from China five years ago. I am a working wife. I am working for a Japanese service company. I came to Hawaiʻi two years ago. My daughter is a first grade student in elementary school. She is just six years old. She came to Hawaiʻi one year ago.

When my husband and I organized this family, he was a full-time student getting a master's degree. I was an assistant engineer of a spinning and weaving factory in China. There were almost 4,000 workers in the factory. My major was the technology of spinning and weaving. I liked that job very much. I could not only design products but I also could operate machinery like a worker.

After my husband finished school two years later, the government sent to the Cultural Communications Center of the East-West in America for a special program. After the program finished, he decided to stay in America to continue his studies and work. I was faced with the choice between the family and my personal career. I knew America was a nice place. America represented freedom, a rich life, and many opportunities. But I also knew clearly that those things were not available to me for one reason: I could not understand English.

I had never thought of living in another country. So I was not prepared for immigration. If I chose America, that would mean I would lose my personal future. If I chose China, that would mean I would lose my family. It was hard. It was hard to decide. My husband told me this opportunity was not easy to get, but it would be always easy to go back to China. He said, "You are supposed to create and preserve opportunities for our daughter. Let her decide if we go to America or stay in China. If you don't come to America, she will have no choice." So finally, I quit my job and flew to America for my family. For my daughter.

I encountered many problems after I came here. The worst problem besides the English problem was the financial problem. Because my husband was still studying, he couldn't work and the Chinese money we had was hardly worth anything in America. So I took two jobs to solve this problem. I had planned to go to school full-time after my husband finished school. But when he finished school, my daughter was arriving at school age—five years old. This is the best age to immigrate. She could adapt to everything quickly. But if she came, I couldn't go to school full-time. I needed to spend a lot of time taking care of her.

One more time, I was faced with the choice between the family and my personal future. I struggled a long time. My daughter’s visa expired twice. Finally, I made a decision to educate my daughter first and give up myself. One year ago, she came here. I quit my school and made a study plan for her. The plan included math, drawing, English and typing. When I taught her English, I often used a dictionary. Now if she asks me some questions, and I don't answer right away, she always brings a dictionary to me. The dictionary seems like an encyclopedia. Through one-year training, she can type on a computer. She can do addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Her English especially is improved. She can talk to her classmates in English. She can read an easy storybook. She speaks English better than I do. So she corrects my pronunciation sometimes. She is out of the English as a Second Language SLEP class. But I am going back to ESL 003 again. I don't regret it. I am very happy.

When I was young, my grandmother told me, “The husband is the sun. The wife is the moon. The children are hope.” In my sense, a real successful woman and good woman must be a good wife and good mother. The small family is like a mirror. People can see you from it. I attend to my husband’s and my daughter’s appearance and health. I like to deck them up. When I go to the shopping center, I enjoy going to the men’s and child’s counter often. A friend who went shopping with me was amazed.

I cook Chinese food for them every day and change food tastes every day. People think I like cooking. But I really hate cooking. Before I got married, I never cooked. But I like to see my husband and my daughter eat more, so I try hard to cook good things for them.

My friends advised me, “The idea of you and the children is all false. Only you, yourself, are real.” I was surprised that they had this kind of idea. I have even looked for some reasons to support my actions. But even if what they say is true, I think that I can not change myself. I am a traditional Chinese woman.
I admire my great-grandfather for many things. He is a very popular, successful, and respected person. Unfortunately, my great-grandfather passed away early when my father was still a child. My father always told us stories about my great-grandfather. He was born in the late 1800s (the Dynasty of Ching) from a poor family in Canton, China. During the 1800s, every family was very poor, and they did not have much money to buy food or send their children to school. Every day my great-grandfather went to the field for many years with his parents. Many times, his parents saw that he used a stick and charcoal to write and draw things on the floor or in the field. Therefore, they decided to work hard in the fields and sell more food to the open markets in order to earn money. Then, they would send my great-grandfather to school.

In school my great-grandfather was the most intelligent among the students. He got the highest grades in his classes. When he graduated from high school, a teacher recommended that he take the exam of “highest graduate of the Hanlin Academy.” This was the hardest for the Chinese, because it has forced over millions of students to take the exam. Unfortunately, the school only selected ten people out of many millions of people. Therefore, my great-grandfather was very worried and nervous about passing this test.

When the test results came out, he was one of the “highest graduates of the Hanlin Academy.” From that time when he came home, he sat on a sedan chair with ten people to carry it and many officers with him. From that time, he became very rich and famous where he lived. He hired many workers to work for his houses and raise his children. Since he knew everything, many people respected him. When people’s babies were born, they brought the babies to my great-grandfather and asked him to give a nice name to the baby. When people were sick, my great-grandfather helped them. Sometimes people wanted my great-grandfather to tell them their future because he could read people’s palms.

It is people’s choice to believe these things about my great-grandfather. I still remember, when my father was still a child, he wrote my father a note about his future. We still remember one sentence that said my father would have a major accident when he became middle-aged, around 40-50 years old. Guess what? My father really had an accident, when he was 43, from working on a hotel. It was the day after a hurricane, and the parking lot was filled with water. My father’s supervisor told him to move the glass stacks away, so they could clean up. Each stack was about seven feet high. As my father was holding the glass on one side, the supervisor was pushing from the other side. I guess the supervisor forgot my dad was on the other side. She pushed hard, and the whole stack of glass fell down on top of my father’s legs. He didn’t know what went on after that. However, as soon as he woke up, he was already in the hospital. He couldn’t feel his legs. Both his ankle bonds had broken; he couldn’t work or walk for six months.

I want to become like my great-grandfather, who was so intelligent and successful, and especially because he could tell peoples’ future by looking at their palms.
Mr. Yamamoto is 80 years old with short white hair and long nose hair. He is well built for an older Japanese man. He always wears an old, blue windbreaker and carries an old, blue bag with his textbooks. He appears to be an ordinary, retired local Japanese man, yet it is surprising how young at heart he is.

He was born in Hawai‘i, but he moved to Japan with his mother when he was three years old, because his father passed away. When he was seven years old, his mother also died, so he was raised by his grandmother. He lived in Japan until he was 19 years old; however, he did not get much education. At that time the Japanese education system was very poor, but most of the reason was his grandmother. He said, “My grandmother always called me stupid. I was very angry at her, so I decided not to study and to really be stupid.” He was a stubborn young boy.

Just before he turned 20 years old, he moved back to Hawai‘i to avoid the Japanese selective service. He worked at Honolulu Sake Brewery Company first, and after that he worked many different jobs. He always worked very hard. He believes that hard work is the key to success. Then he married a local Japanese woman, and they had a daughter.

Ten years later in their marriage, they started a small local restaurant at Kaka‘ako. He also worked as a taxi driver after the restaurant closed to send his daughter to private school. He wanted to go back to school to study English; however, he had to work hard to take care of his family. When he was 69 years old, he went to McKinley High School, and he got a high school diploma.

Currently he is attending Kapi‘olani Community College. During his seven years at KCC as a part-time student, he was working full-time, and he was taking one English course at the time and playing golf on weekends as a hobby. I asked him why he was going to school because I wanted to go back to school myself, but I felt it was too late to do so. He answered, “I am dumb, that’s why.” Then he smiled like a young boy. He also said to me, “You have fifty more years to study, and it is important to continue.”

This inspired me, and I decided to go back to school; furthermore, he taught me the importance of education. Everyone has an opportunity to study in college, and every year more and more people are going back to school to get a higher education. His goal is to get some kind of college degree, and I hope he can make his goal.
My Mother
Masako Pudwill

My mother is eighty years old, and her Japanese name is Reiko Watanabe (Reiko means "beautiful"). She means so much to my family because she is a very courageous and generous person. I've never known another person like her in my life.

My mother was born on September 16, 1912, in North Korea. She was the first child of the Kin family. Unfortunately Reiko's mother was a physically weak person. Therefore, my mother was adopted by her grandmother, who had a maid. Her parents made a good living, so she told us how wonderful a time she had as a child.

Since she was little, and as she grew up, Reiko wanted to become a nurse. When she was twenty years old, she helped out at a Japanese military hospital. At that time, Korea was conquered by the Japanese; therefore, she needed to get an education to become a nurse in Japan, but unfortunately her parents did not approve of her wish. Then, one year later, she met my father, fell in love, got married, and went to Tokyo, Japan. She started going to the Medical School of Tokyo Japan-ōshi Ikadaigaku Shiyōwa. After two years of hard study, she got a license as a nurse.

It was 1936 and many of the Japanese people at this time were very badly discriminated against in Korea. The discrimination is part of the history of Japan. However, on August 25, 1945, World War II came to an end, and at that time my mother had five children. My father lost his job, so my parents decided to move to my father's birthplace of Kofu, in Yamanashi Prefecture, a little town to the north of Tokyo.

My father was the son of a farmer, so he thought his birth home had lots of food. Little did they know that there was no food for my family, because my step-grandmother, who lived on the farm at this time, was prejudiced against my mother, who was Korean. My step-grandmother had so much hatred toward my parents and us that she cut down fruit trees in the yard so none of us could eat.

In order for my mother to feed her children, she exchanged her belongings, like jewelry and silk kimonos, for food. This was the beginning of many hardships for my mother and our family. She even had to sneak to the river in the freezing cold at night just to wash her children's clothes because the village people didn't allow her to wash clothes with them during the day. Nevertheless, she wasn't only strong but compassionate toward her children and other people. I remember the generosity in her when she gave up her lunch to a hungry man with two children. This touched me so much.

Fifteen years ago my step-grandmother died. What amazed me is that even though my mother had suffered poor treatment from her and did not get the land, which step-grandmother had before she died, she apologized to my mother for all the things she had done to her and her family. Moreover, my step-grandmother's sons had not taken care of their own mother and did not even visit her when she was ill. It was this that made her realize that my mother was a great person. My mother described her feelings after all the hardships, prejudice, and hatred—like the picking of fruit—that she had gone through and all her efforts of getting my step-grandmother's affection.

Today my mother is eighty-four years old. She makes all kinds of handicrafts, collects and recycles cans, and donates all of this to the church.

Throughout my life with my mother, I have learned from her compassion, kindness, and patience that every human being would be better if each was like her, including me. That's why I am very proud of my mother, and I hope some day to take her back to her birth country.
Every year, as the full moon of July comes, thousands of Vietnamese Buddhists jam the pagodas to remember their parents’ merit. The lucky ones who still have a mother, can wear red roses on their shirts. I’m one of the lucky ones. My mother is the most valuable person in my life.

I was born in the days when South Vietnam was ruled by the Communists. My father was in a labor camp. We were kids and our mother toiled hard to collect money to bring us up and feed our father in the camp. I felt pity for my mother. Coming from a rich family and being a wife of a lieutenant, she had never worked hard or worried about finances before. But when the Communists appeared, her life changed. It seemed that a storm attacked her. She could not sleep well at night. Every day she had to get up at 4:00 a.m. to make breakfast for us. After we ate breakfast, she took us to school. On the way home, she dropped in at the market to buy a few things so that she could make a pan of fresh-water crab soup to peddle.

When the clock struck 12 o’clock noon, our mother left home with her pan of soup. Rain or shine, she still carried out her job. She went from place to place to invite everybody to enjoy it. Once in a while, unfortunately, she came back home with a half a pan of soup. Instead of cooking dinner, we got to eat it all and prayed the day after would be a good day for her. After dinner, while we did homework, she made clothes for neighbors. We encouraged each other to finish our studies early in order to help our mother sew the buttons on the shirts. As we worked, we listened to the fairy tales she told. At that time, nothing was a source of entertainment in our family except those stories. As we listened to them, we wished one day there would be an ancient saint who would save us from poverty and our father from camp.

Eventually, some of my siblings grew up. In order to share housekeeping burdens with our mother, they refused the door of college and worked after graduating from high school. But one more time, trouble came to our mother. When our father was released from camp, he was blind. During the 10 years our father was still alive, she took care of him without complaining. She walked him every morning. She encouraged him to write poems.

Life seemed to be better for her when we settled in Hawai'i. Yet, in fact it was not. Old age took away her lifetime friend, our father. She now faces more depression and loneliness since we’re sometimes away from her for work and school. When we finish our work, we only want to go home as soon as possible to be with her. We hope we can succeed in life quickly to make her pleased and share happiness with her.

“Mother.” What a sweet word! Mother is everything in our hearts and souls. What she’s done for us is more than an equivalent amount of water to fill the Pacific Ocean.
My journey to self-acceptance has been a long and tough battle. Not only did I have to fight myself, but my family and society as well. The isolation, fear of being rejected, and self-doubt I had to encounter and overcome has made me a more confident and assertive person. I have accepted myself and am proud of who I am, for I am living my life for myself and no one else. This may sound to you like life, which it is, but my struggle was a little harder than others because I am gay.

Before I came out (admitting to myself that I was gay), I felt so isolated from the world; I felt that I was the only one going through this predicament. It was as if I had been placed in the middle of a foreign country, without any directions, and asked to find my way home. At that time in my life, I did not know which way was up or down.

Looking back, I am surprised that I was able to function. When I finally started to come to grips with the fact of being gay, everyday tasks became harder. Work especially was hard. I remember the frame of mind I was in: ALWAYS watching what I said and did, along with what I did not say or do, making sure I did not say or do anything that might clue someone in to the fact I was a homosexual. I was constantly second-guessing myself; I spent more time worrying about what people were thinking of me than doing my job.

I remember standing in the corner of the restaurant (I was a waiter at the time) waiting for the dinner rush when one of the hostesses noticed the way I was standing with my wrist a little bent. She came up to me and said, "Wayne, look at the way you’re standing; you look like a mahu." I was horrified. I asked myself: "Does she now know that I am gay? If she does, is she going to tell anyone and if people do find out, what will they do? Will they still like me?" The rest of the week I watched my stance, making sure I did not stand in a way that would be considered "gay." From that time on, I was always conscious of my posture.

Being rejected by my family was one of the other fears I had. During that time, I had to rely on myself for guidance. I could not, I felt, turn to anyone. My sole source of information about coming out was through the media. I would watch television shows about people telling their family that they were gay, hoping that I could get some information I could use. I did not. In fact, by watching television, I became reluctant to inform my family about what I was going through because one day, while viewing a talk show, one of my family members said something that would make a lasting impression.

My sister and I were watching the Oprah show; the topic was coming out to one’s family. One of the guests was informing the viewers about the struggle he had gone through in order to get to that point in his life: coming out and telling his family. While he was talking about his experience, I could relate to what he was going through; at the time, I was experiencing the same thing. During a commercial break, my sister “went off”; she acted as if she were a Baptist preacher doing a Sunday sermon. She was saying that homosexuals are disgusting and immoral. She commented, "If I know that someone is gay, I would not want to associate with him, nor would I want him near me."

After hearing that, I was stunned. It was as if I were a deer caught in the middle of the road by a speeding car with its high beams on; I could not move. I was thinking that if I told her she would never speak to me again. She would reject me as her brother. If she felt that way, so would the rest of my family. That is when I started to withdraw from my family.

During that time, I was slowly coming to grips with my sexuality; I was starting to accept myself. I spent many sleepless nights thinking about what I should do: live my life for my family and deny who I am, or live my life for myself. The decision I had to make took me on a journey where I had to get in touch with myself. I constantly asked myself if I was strong enough to live on my own. I knew that this would be a milestone in my life. Whatever I decided would affect the rest of my life. I went back and forth with my decision. Yes, I could live my life without my family; I was strong enough. On the other hand, no I could not; I needed my family. In those days, I was in constant turmoil.

At that point in my life, we had a family crisis; an uncle became deathly ill, and the prognosis was not good. So, my father, mother, and I decided we would go to help the rest of his family cope with what was in store. Upon arriving there in May of 1989, I met one of my cousins for the first time in twenty years. Right from the start, my cousin and I “clicked.” Shortly after we arrived, my uncle took a turn for the better. What started out to be a trip when I thought I would be a pallbearer at my uncle’s funeral became a family reunion. To become acquainted with each other, he and I decided to go out on the town. During our conversation, my cousin informed me he was gay. I was in shock and relieved at the same time. So I confided in him that I was gay, too. It was as if two tons of bricks had been lifted off me. I finally felt free because I told another person. At the same time, I was not ready for my family to know; I was not strong enough. I swore my cousin to secrecy.

Shortly after that night, my family and I had to go back to the Islands. Upon
arriving home, I felt that I was a different person because of what I had revealed to my cousin. I was no longer fearful of being gay since I had told my cousin. Finally, I had admitted to myself that I was an okay person. Slowly, I became more confident, but I still was not ready to tell my family. I wanted to be comfortable with myself before I did so. To see if I could live alone, I decided that I would move to the mainland. I informed my family about my decision. They were wondering why I would want to move. I told them that I just wanted to see what life was like on the mainland. They were puzzled by my decision, but they gave me support.

A year after I moved, I was living my life openly as a gay man and had enough strength to tell my family about my sexuality. It was the hardest thing I had to do because I was setting myself up for rejection. Before I told my family, I told myself to hope for the best, but prepare myself for the worst, meaning that if they accepted me great, but if they did not, I was ready to live my life without a family.

I first told my sister. She was not too happy about it. In fact, she was cruel. Her exact words were: “I knew you were a faggot. I do not like it.” Hearing those words come out of my sister’s mouth was as if someone had taken a knife and plunged it into my heart; it hurt. I told my mother next. I was just as shocked at her response as I was at my sister’s but for a different reason. My mom said: “I love you no matter what. You’re my son. All I want is for you to be happy.” That was music to my ears; it was just what I needed to hear. My father, on the other hand, was a different story. He did not accept my being gay at all. My father told me that it was sick and disgusting and that I was no longer his son. Hearing that coming from my own father’s mouth took me aback. Though I told myself to be prepared for the worst, I was not ready to hear my dad utter those words.

That was six years ago. I am glad to say that my mother is still accepting. My sister, Wendy, has come full circle; she and I talk about everything, including my lifestyle. My father has not spoken to me since then. To this day, I hurt because of my father’s treatment, but I would rather dislike me for who I am than like me for who I am not. Accepting myself has been a long and tough battle, but if I had to do it over, I would not change a thing. For once in my life, I am not worried about what people think of me. I am living my life for myself.

There I was at the airport, Ben Gurion, Tel Aviv, waiting for my flight to New York. It was a hot day, but inside the airport the air conditioning made me forget about the heat outside and the endless crowds of people, cars, and buses mixed up like a big unappetizing live multicolored salad, making it seem like the apocalypse was coming. It was only four years ago that I arrived for the first time there, full of hope for a new beginning in a young country, but now, after so many bitter experiences, it felt like a lifetime.

Two more hours and I can leave Israel forever, I was thinking to myself during those moments while waiting in line to check my bags.

Reflecting over what had happened over these four years, I found myself asking, “Did I spent these years, trying to do my best, for nothing?” not knowing for sure the right answer. I looked like them, I dressed like them, my Hebrew was almost perfect, with only a slight Romanian accent, but still I wasn’t one of them. Was I really different? As I entered the airplane I knew I had a one-way ticket; there was no way back for me, and suddenly a warm sensation of happiness and relief went through my body. After I put on my seatbelt, while the plane started to speed towards its impressive takeoff, I began, almost like a VCR, to play in my mind clichés, bits and pieces of my high school years spent in Israel.

One year ago, I was in the 10th grade. I was 16. “Is that your ‘teudat zehut?’” came Erick’s sharp question from behind me, while I was searching through my wallet for my bus pass. (In Israel, all Israeli citizens, age 16 and up, are
required by law to get a "teudat zehut," which is a picture I.D. on which, among other data about the owner, is noted the owner's religion.)

"Yes, I just got it a month ago," I replied without looking at him, while still searching, "I'm going to make mine next week. May I see it?" he asked me while reaching for my I.D. He grabbed it from my hand without waiting for my reply. After a few moments he looked at me in bewilderment and asked me: "Did you notice the mistake on your 'teudat zehut'?"

What mistake?" I replied without having a clue about what he was referring to.

"Are you Christian?" he asked me, this time with a grimace of disgust, looking at me like he had just seen a putrefied version of me. It didn't take a long time for the rumor to spread and everyone who knew me, either as their colleague or their friend, and even students who hadn't noticed me before knew me now as Hanutzry (the Hebrew word for Christian). It didn't bother me to be called that, but it bothered me the way they were referring to it like this was some kind of disease. In Romania, my family raised me in a nonreligious environment.

Although we strongly believed in God and loved his creation, we didn't go to church or synagogue. One thing my parents hadn't taught me was to hate or even to think that one's religion or belief was better than another's. It was impossible for me to understand why people would look at me differently, just because my I.D. stated that I was Christian. Although my father is Jewish and I carry a Jewish name, according to the Jewish religion, I am considered Christian because my mother is. This wasn't the first experience I had with racism, but this time I was very surprised about my colleagues' reaction, and the consequences of this first incident I encountered in Israel.

It came to me just like an earthquake, and like an earthquake it found me unprepared and unarmed; I was defenseless. It was a big shock also because I thought that racism existed only at an inferior level of very limited people. It was hard to believe that, especially in a country like Israel, where people are familiar with the atrocities committed by the Nazis, racism had such a strong influence over most people: "Haven't they learned anything from their past or at least from their ancestors?" Maybe in Israel racism felt worse because I had higher expectations of my colleagues, thinking that they were mature and sensitive enough not to judge someone differently only because he has a different religion; furthermore, I wasn't even practicing this religion.

Also because I hadn't taken it very seriously in the beginning, I never even thought that I would have a problem with that so I never even tried to hide it. I knew already that most Israelites disliked Arabs because of the terrorism problem in Israel. Personally, I didn't agree with that idea either, but I didn't expect Israelis to have similar feelings about others, regardless of their beliefs. I felt so frustrated to know that the communist nightmare I had left behind me when I left Romania wasn't as bad as the democratic paradise I found in Israel, where unwritten rules degraded one as a human being.

As sad as I was, a joke popped into my mind: "There was this Christian guy in love with a Jewish girl. He asked her parents for her hand, but they replied, 'We won't give our daughter's hand for a poor Christian. If you really love our daughter you shall convert and only then you might ask us again.' Years later, after the Christian converted and was happily married to the Jewish girl, he received an unexpected visit from her father who found pork in their kitchen. Very upset, he asked his son-in-law why he kept nonkosher food in his house. To which he replied: 'Excuse me, but I've just converted the pork this morning, now this is beef, so it's kosher!'

As the big jumbo jet approached New York, I came to a conclusion: discrimination is a never-ending story for the unlucky one who didn't learn his lesson, and the more he discriminates against another for any reason, the more the one who is discriminated against by him is paying back with the same coin. They'll never get anywhere; they'll just start it over and over, until they destroy each other, unless they are both willing to learn to accept each other just the way they are.
The first day at Palolo Elementary School in Spring 1980 was an unforgettable time for me. I felt different in my surroundings, seeing all the new places and new faces that were not familiar to me. Even my neighbors appeared very strange to me. The girl next door said something to me with her hand pointing in a downward motion; I didn’t understand a word she said. I could tell from her hand gesture that she must have been asking me where I was visiting from or if I lived here. I yelled for my brother, who had been here three years before I arrived. He told her that I had just come from Laos. She nodded her head. Again, he informed her that I was starting school the next day. At that moment, the thoughts of dread filled my head. How am I going to communicate with my teachers? Am I going to make any friends? Will they like me? These questions haunted me as I was lying in bed, thinking about school the next day.

I was the first one to wake up the next morning. I put on a white T-shirt with the logo “Hawaii” on it and a pair of pink corduroy straight leg pants, with my long wavy black hair braided in two braids on both sides falling down to my shoulders. I watched some early morning cartoons, “Tom and Jerry” and the “Road Runner,” as I was eating fried eggs and rice for breakfast, waiting for my mom to get ready.

My mom and brother took me to the school’s office to register on my first day at Palolo Elementary School. After an hour, the paperwork was all finished. Because my mom had to go to work, she told me the lady in the office would take me to my homeroom. The big lady wore a long mu’umu’u with her hair in a big bun and rows of purple orchids stuck to the side of it. She gave me a big warm smile with her double chin hanging down to her neck as she walked toward me. “Let’s go,” she whispered slowly.

We walked to the second floor; from the hallway, I heard kids being really loud. As we entered the classroom, the students became very quiet. The lady introduced me to the teacher as I stood there in front of the class. The teacher introduced herself to me. “My name is Mrs. Ohara,” she said pointing to her chest, and I responded, “Me name is Somchay.” The class burst out with silly laughter. I could feel my face turning really red; hot waves went through my body with a rush, like a red hot chili pepper. “Oh my gosh! did I just say something stupid?” I thought to myself. Finally, the teacher pointed to the empty chair where I took my seat. After lunch, the teacher asked a Laotian student that spoke English very well to translate for me. I felt more at ease, because someone could help me. He said that the teacher wanted me to go to the ESL class where the ESL teacher would teach me how to read, write, and communicate in basic English. I nodded my head as I felt more relaxed. “You can get all your books now,” he said politely. “I’ll go with you and show you where the classroom is.” I shyly nodded my head again, then I followed him quietly to the first floor where my classroom was. I felt comfortable in my ESL class because there were only three of us in class. The teacher read to us with her hand pointing to the picture, then we repeated after her. The book had lots of pictures and very few sentences. It also had my favorite cartoon character in it, “Tom and Jerry.”

It was fun to learn. The teacher made us read and pronounce each syllable slowly. She put her palm to her lips to show us how to pronounce “cat” correctly. More than once, we said “Catsss.” Then she pointed to a picture in the book. “This is a cat,” she said, pointing to one cat. After school I took the book home and practiced reading to myself until I could recite the story without looking at the book. I was so anxious to learn. After three months of school right before summer started, I knew I had improved quite a bit on my reading and verbal skills. I could communicate with my teacher and friends much better now. It turned out to be an embarrassing moment but also a wonderful and educational experience for me. Little did I know, in such a short time I would pick up the language pretty well. I want to thank my ESL teacher who really had the patience with me. Fifteen years later, I’m back in school again. Somehow it feels like Spring 1980 all over again.
My Dream of Teaching
Tuong-Han Nguyen

Education plays a very important role in the society of every country. It is a vital foundation of a country. Without education, people could not acquire knowledge about literature, mathematics, history, business, computers or medicine. Without improving their knowledge, people might just follow their instincts as if they were educated people. It is obvious that the higher the educational level of a country, the more civilized life is for people in that country.

I did not realize these lofty and important purposes of education when I decided to become a teacher. The idea of becoming a teacher appeared in my mind when I was still young, sixteen years old. That was the time when I had to leave my cherished secondary school, where I had studied for four years, from the sixth to the ninth grade. I then became a high school student. After beginning my humdrum and worried life in high school for about two months, I decided to choose teaching as my career for the rest of my life.

The first whole month in the high school, I was really depressed. My mind was always tense because of the high responsibilities that my new and stern teachers mentioned all the time. They told us we had to learn how to take notes from their lectures because they would not write down every single word on the blackboard like teachers in the secondary school. They kept asking us to go to the library to hunt for materials besides reading textbooks in class. They said we were now high school students, so we should be independent. We were all grown-ups and we had to take care of ourselves. I felt so depressed. I did not see any responsibilities and I did not realize any change in my new life. I thought I could not meet the requirements of high school students. So, every day I went to school more worried than happy. The first few weeks in my new school, I felt tired of studying. Something invisible burdened my shoulders. I did not enjoy my new life in high school until the day when teacher Quang became the headteacher of my class.

I always called him Teacher Quang. He entered my classroom on a Monday, in October, my first year in high school. The first thing he said he wanted to do was to know all the names of the fifty-five students in my class. I did not know why I was the first student whose name he asked while I was sitting among over fifty other students.

"Han!" he said. "Does it mean happiness? Sure it does. Your face tells me that."

Maybe at that time I was in a good mood. I laughed and all my classmates laughed, too. We started to know each other well. Then, I noticed that he never forgot my name although he was sometimes confused about all the others' names. I thought I might be an important student to him. So in his class I tried to study my best. I listened carefully to his lectures after I had read the textbook at home. I did not want him disappointed in me. I gradually became one of the best students in his class. He often called on me to answer questions about his lectures. He had me hand out papers to all the students in the class. He asked me to help him to explain his lectures for those who did not understand clearly. These things made me feel highly honored. In the other classes, I also studied hard because I was afraid he would know about my low grades. I gradually made progress in my studying. I began to enjoy my life in high school.

Once, I told Teacher Quang how he encouraged me to study and helped me to get rid of the invisible burden in my mind. He told me that he also had the same feeling when he changed from secondary school to high school. We talked to each other about school; then I suddenly made a strong decision.

"One day, I will become a teacher," I told him.

He did not say anything and looked at me for a while. Then, he asked, "Why?"
I told him simply, "Because I want to be like you."

"No," he said, "you are yourself. One day, you will be better than me. You may be a famous actress or a well-known doctor. Why be a teacher and teach?"

Like in an oral examination, I looked at him and answered without thinking. "Being an actress, I won't have any students. I cannot stand in front of my students every day. Being a doctor, I cannot teach my students anything. One day when I become a teacher, I will love my students and teach them all my knowledge. I will teach them to respect their parents, study and work hard, love the country and also the humanities."

"All right," he said. "But remember, keep in your mind one day you will be better than me."

After that, the idea of becoming a teacher was in my mind all the time. Among hundreds of occupations, there is no occupation which is more noble than teaching. Teaching not only supplies knowledge of science, history, literature and mathematics but also helps students to behave as educated people. The duty of teaching is so important. The gratitude to teachers is as much as to parents. All of these thoughts helped me strongly believe my right choice for my career in the future.

Today, if I meet Teacher Quang, I will
I was too afraid to look at him and proudly say, "I am now a teacher." After I graduated from high school, I chose business as my major in college. I still dreamed about my teaching occupation, but the social circumstances did not allow me to make my dream come true. Thousands of young graduated teachers who were full of zeal to contribute their knowledge of education to younger generations became secretaries, tellers, receptionists, or even barbers. Because of the destitute economy in Vietnam, the government cut down the budget for education as much as it could. Teaching was one of the occupations that received the lowest pay in the society. That pittance could not support even the plain lifestyle of a teacher. I kept my dream of teaching in my heart, and chose business as my major in college.

One day, I will definitely make my dream come true. It is not today when I have to worry too much about bills or expenditures for daily life. Like a singer who would like to share his music with the artistic world, I will devote a certain period of time in my life to teaching.
My Friend, Ixos
Dung (Madeline) Truong

A dark tunnel is not only a place where one can hide, but it is also a place where I found a friend. When I was seven, I lived in Waikiki in a second floor apartment. It was a typical afternoon coming home from school. I decided to take a shortcut to get home, and I accidentally discovered a special place. No one appreciated the shabby, possibly haunted tunnel except me. Trees and bushes twined their thorns around the tunnel, concealing our hidden place. I walked slowly inside the tunnel, and I discovered a unique friend named Ixos.

During the night, when everyone was asleep, I peered through my window to see if Ixos would come out and play in the playground. Folding my hands together and putting my head on my pillow, I gathered some thoughts about the special tunnel where I believed my buddy lived. I wondered every night if she was waiting for me to visit her. When Saturdays arrived, I brushed my teeth, changed my clothes, and ate my breakfast quickly. I rushed to the elevator so that by the time my mother came back from church, I would be back at home.

In the murky, dusky, and somber tunnel lived my best friend. Ixos was a "special" friend, not an "ordinary friend," like those in a classroom or next door. The tunnel was a place of feeling wanted and accepted. I felt as secure in Ixos' tunnel as I felt with my mother. Even though Ixos was more of a listener than a talker, I felt as if she cared for me. She listened to every word I spoke, but the only problem that we both had was communication. Whenever I started a sentence she would echo after me; however, we got along fine. I just couldn't understand why she would never show herself. Since I was unsure what she looked like, I always searched for her. In the dark I tried to find my way towards Ixos. All I ended up with were blisters and dirt underneath my nails.

I remember one ludicrous incident when I visited Ixos. It was Friday, and I wanted to share my chocolate cupcake with her. I was in a rush to get to Ixos, and I did not realize that I had almost caused an automobile accident. A policeman stopped me and told me that I should have looked both ways before I crossed the street. The officer's name was Officer Oliver. We had a great conversation, even though he laughed about the questions I asked.

"Did you know that I have a friend living in that tunnel?" I said as I pointed my finger towards the fire hydrant next to my tunnel.

"You do?" he said with a concerned face.

"YES! I do have a friend who lives in there. She is nice to me and she repeats all the things I say and listens to me. I named her Ixos because my teacher told me to," I said confidently.

"Is that chocolate cupcake for your friend?" he said with a smirk.

"Yes, officer," I said as I took a bite out of it.

"Well, young lady, you better go, before you eat it all up. Your friend will have none," he said with a smile on his face.

I skipped down the road holding my cupcake. I finally reached the tunnel and I cried out her name. I thought that maybe this time I could bargain with her.

"I got you a chocolate cupcake!" I yelled anxiously, stretching my hand into the dark tunnel.

I yelled for her ten times and there was no response. I tried to search for her through the darkness, screaming for her at the same time, but there was no sign of her. Tears began to form. My feet were so numb that I couldn't move. There was this little voice in the back of my head telling me to keep on searching for her, but my feet didn't budge. I tried to crunch my body into a small ball with my back leaning against the cold wall of the tunnel, waiting to see if maybe she might come out. I put my cupcake by my side and somehow I fell asleep.

Sometime during the afternoon, I woke up because I heard someone crying out my name. I realized that it was my mom searching for me. I could tell by her voice that she was hoping nothing had happened to me. I started to cry, and I ran toward my mother. I wrapped my arms around her waist tightly, hoping to find some comfort. To my surprise, she didn't scream at or lecture me. She seemed to sense that her child had lost a best friend.

That night, I looked through my window, still wishing that Ixos would come out and play. I had left my cupcake in the tunnel for her. I was thinking maybe she would eat it and leave her teeth marks as evidence.

The next day arrived, and the construction workers knocked Ixos' home down to build a new road. I pleaded with my father for hours to tell the workers to stop. I was determined to check for my cupcake, but the only thing I could do after those long, agonizing hours was to say good-bye to my best friend, Ixos.
The Deal That Went Bad
Janelle Uekawa

I should've known something was going to happen. I just couldn't believe it could happen to me. In the "drug world," you can't trust anyone! It's not something I or anyone else should be involved with. After I almost got shot last year, I realized that my boyfriend and drugs weren't going to be a part of my life anymore. I put my life on the line for the guy I was involved with. After I almost got shot last year, I realized that my boyfriend and drugs weren't going to be a part of my life anymore. I put my life on the line for the guy I was involved with. After I almost got shot last year, I realized that my boyfriend and drugs weren't going to be a part of my life anymore. I put my life on the line for the guy I was involved with.

Within a month of being together, I had moved in. I had never known anything about "dealing" before I met him. As time went by, I had learned a lot about it. All of which I wish I could forget.

We had gotten home around 11:00 that night, and we did our usual chores. My boyfriend fell asleep at around 1:00, while I was still doing my own thing. He got a page on his beeper, and since I was up, I called it back. It was one of his "clients," and they wanted some drugs. At first I was hesitant to "set-up" a deal, but I soon gave in. Everything was set. I was to get $300 for a gram and a quarter of ice. I was excited. For that amount of ice, that was a really good price on my side of the deal.

As I was weighing and packaging the drugs, I got nervous about actually doing this alone. I was used to having my boyfriend around. This was the very first deal I had made entirely on my own. I would never have thought anything could go wrong, but it did.

I had gone downstairs to meet the client. We were in a secured building, and I didn't have a key. I wasn't planning on going out of the building anyway. When I got downstairs, there were two of them. I didn't think anything of it, because I knew both of them. Let them into the building lobby. They asked to see the product, and I let them, not knowing what was about to happen.

They acted "cool." One got up, showed the product to the other, and both commented on the appearance of the product. Then it happened. One of them ran out of the building with the product. I tried to chase him, but the other guy grabbed me. I turned around and hit the guy holding me. He let me go, and I ran outside. He caught me right outside the door. I was frantic by then.

I told him, "You can't just let him go!! You know I need either the money or the product back!!""

"Yeah, I know. I know." I screamed at him, "Well, do something and help me!!"

He then pulled out a 9 mm. gun and flashed it at me. I glanced at it then got furious. They had planned this all along! I didn't think. I turned around and ran down the ramp, looking for the other guy, but I couldn't see anyone. I turned around to look for the guy with the gun, but he too was gone. I ran down the street, but I had no luck. They were both gone, and I was locked out of the building. What was I to do?

I ran to a friend's house in hopes that he could help me. I was so overwhelmed by what had just happened that I couldn't speak too clearly. He couldn't understand a word I was saying, so my friend and a friend of his calmed me down as I repeated what had happened. They didn't help me much. No consolation, no comfort, nothing. I felt alone and hurt. I thought they were my friends.

I drove around for a few hours before going to my mom's house. While I was driving I did a lot of thinking; that's when I made the decision to leave my boyfriend and to quit drugs. I realized that I could have died or gotten seriously hurt by those guys, and that my boyfriend cared too much about drugs and money, rather than me and my safety. Not once did he ask me if I was hurt in any way. He just yelled, cussed, called me names, and he even threatened me.

He finally called around 8:00 in the morning, and, sure enough, he was furious!! He was yelling, cussing, calling me names, and he even threatened me. He was yelling so loudly that even when I held the phone at an arm's length, I could hear and understand him loud and clear. I became scared; I started crying, and I seriously thought he would hurt me.

Being the person that I was, I went home right after I hung up. I was still crying and shaking with terror. When I got home, he continued to yell at me. Then he hit me. That was it. I grabbed my necessities and enough clothes to stay away for awhile, and I left. He kept begging me to stay, apologizing, and he even sat on the hood of my car. I kept telling him to get off because I would go with or without him on the hood. He was stubborn, so I started the car. He got off, moved to the side, and I left. I was still crying, still shaking.

I drove around for a few hours before going to my mom's house. While I was driving I did a lot of thinking; that's when I made the decision to leave my boyfriend and to quit drugs. I realized that I could have died or gotten seriously hurt by those guys, and that my boyfriend cared too much about drugs and money, rather than me and my safety. Not once did he ask me if I was hurt in any way. I cherished my life too much for that, and I wanted more out of life than drugs and abuse.
Inherited Strength
Barbie White

My mother, Felicita Jane Castillo, is the only parent I’ve known. In 1974, when I was five, my brother Ron was four, and my sister Cherie was three, our parents went through an ugly battle called divorce. They disagreed about and disputed everything. Through the legal system we were awarded custody in care of our mother. That was the beginning of our difficult journey. With no money, no job and no home, we were forced, under the circumstances, to live with relatives. I know now that my mother’s life was a difficult one because of our constant moving and transferring of schools.

It wasn’t until six years passed that our lives finally became stable. Mom received a good-paying job as auditor for Hawai’i National Bank. Within a short time she was able to purchase a second-hand car. By the end of the year, in 1979, mom rented a home in the hills of Pacific Palisades. It was a beautiful two-story house with a huge back yard. In this house we found great happiness. I experienced most of my best childhood memories there.

I was taught, at the age of eleven, to be responsible by helping with household duties. Our lives had become normal and our days more routine. A year of living well and independently passed, and my mother started dating again. That was understandable considering how attractive—even beautiful—she was. It wasn’t just her appearance; she had a heart full of love, warmth and understanding. I truly believe that was the essence of who she was. She was also carefree and young at heart. It was almost as if she were a teenager sometimes. With all the obstacles and suffering she had endured, never did I see this woman cry, complain or give up. She was strong-willed and strong-minded. She pushed herself forward, improving our lives.

One day she met a smooth-talking, well-dressed, attractive Italian man, and after a period of time they fell in love. A couple of years passed and then they had a daughter together—my half sister, Gina-Marie. This man was from the town of Methuen in Massachusetts. My mother was swept off her feet and followed him to the east coast. There she started a new life. At the end of summer of my seventh grade year, she sent for us three, leaving behind her home, career and everything she had worked hard for. She wasn’t afraid of change and took many chances.

Our life in Massachusetts was a good one. I was a teenager now and spent a lot of time with my mother. I remember quiet moments of watching television. I’d lie next to her with my head resting in her lap. She would slide her fingers through my hair gently. No words were spoken, but it was in these moments that I would feel how much she truly loved me. The connection of mother and daughter was wonderful. There were also times when we were like best friends. We would spend lots of time together driving to shopping malls in other states and towns. She loved the freedom of driving cross-country, so we did that often.

I remember one particular day when we drove down the coast of Rhode Island. It was a long, slightly curving road, with the mountains on the right side of us and the ocean on the other. Together we listened to Heart’s cassette of “Dog and Butterfly” and sang along. It was a beautiful ride and the air smelled of the salty sea. Finally, after a two-hour drive, we approached a craft fair. It was set up directly across a boardwalk of many little stores. Mom parked the car and we wandered through the craft fair and back toward the boardwalk.

I remember one special store, named Seagulls and Seashells. There were so many wind chimes hanging in the doorway, making a heavenly sound. “Let’s go into this store,” mom suggested.

“Sure,” I responded. “They have some beautiful things in the window.”

“Wow, Barbie, come here! Look at all these musical jewelry boxes.”

“They’re okay,” I said casually until I saw one I really liked.

“Oh mom, look! Unicorns.” I wanted it so badly: It was so beautiful—all glass with brass edges that held the box together, so it was a combination of fragility and strength. The head of a unicorn was perfectly etched into the glass, majestic-looking with its hair blowing as if in the wind.

“Mom, can you buy this for me?”

“Not today, honey. I don’t have enough money on me.”

Inside I was sad but knew that there was no sense in begging for it. It cost seventy dollars and that was a lot of money. So we continued browsing and later started our journey back home.

A month later was my sixteenth birthday. We didn’t have a big party—just a nice dinner, with cake and ice cream. After dinner and the blowing out of candles it was time to open gifts. I always opened my mom’s gift last. The first gift was some earrings, the second a robe, and finally it was time to open mom’s gift. It was wrapped in lavender paper with purple ribbon and a bow. I removed the wrapping and opened the box. There it was: the glass, brass, unicorn jewelry box. I was so happy that I squealed in delight, jumping up to hug and kiss her. I felt so special because I knew that she had driven about fifty miles to get this for me. “I will treasure it forever,” I told my mom, and she smiled.

A week went by and my mother became ill. She had what appeared to be the common flu. It didn’t seem serious so my mom’s boyfriend left for a business
trip. My sisters and I stayed home to take care of her. As the day went on her symptoms got worse. I asked the neighbor to drive us to the hospital; she was admitted immediately. Her blood pressure was way below normal; she was dehydrated and moaning in pain. She asked, "Barbie, rub some water on my lips. They’re so dry." I did what she asked.

"Barbie, I feel as if I’m dying."

"No mom, you’re not. You just have the flu."

"Remember that I love you, Ronnie, Cherie and Gina-Marie."

"Stop talking like that. You’ll be okay."

Then she fell asleep, The doctor assured me that she was improving and that she’d be okay. My friend picked me up and took me home. I fell asleep totally exhausted.

I was wakened by the telephone ring the next morning. My mother’s condition had worsened. They wanted me there immediately. I got dressed as fast as I could and the neighbor dropped me off. The doctor told me that she was in respiratory shock and was hooked up to machines which helped her breathe. He also told me that she was unconscious and wouldn’t recognize me, but he was wrong.

I entered the room and she sensed me. With her eyes closed and with what little strength she had left, she raised her arm towards me. I wasn’t prepared for the sight I saw. I couldn’t believe that this was happening. Everything felt like slow motion as I reached out and grabbed her hand.

I sat there crying, so confused and afraid, not knowing what to do. After an hour had passed the nurse asked me to leave the room while they performed more tests. She convinced me that it was for the best. I hesitated, but began to leave. Just as I was approaching the room door, the machine that monitored her heartbeat changed tone. I knew she was gone. In that moment, I turned around, fell to my knees and screamed "No—!

After that I don’t really remember what happened. I was so devastated because she was my life-line and the only person I had. It was hard for me to come to terms with the fact of never hearing her voice and never feeling her arms hugging me ever again. For months after arriving in Hawai’i, I anguish over her death, locking myself away from the world. I would cry myself to sleep nightly. That went on for a year. It wasn’t until I started going through our family photo albums that I started remembering her and her advice.

"Think of your future and strive for the best. Pursue all your dreams and give life all that you’ve got. No matter where you go or what you choose to do, I’ll be proud of you." She spoke to me in this manner many times, so the words I heard echoing through my mind were so real. That is when I made a choice to go on living.

Taking it one step at a time, I began my road to recovery. I was a junior in high school and went from an A/B student to a borderline F. The counselor at school worked with me and I was able to pass the year, then later graduated. For me to graduate was very important to my mother and I knew she would have been proud.

Although the time with my mother was short, I realize that she prepared me well for this world. She showed me love, friendship, and understanding. These are important values which have helped me become a happily married woman, a full-time mother, and a part-time college student. I am fulfilling my dream of becoming a nurse.

My mother is my strength.
Listen to Your Heart
Brenda Brickwood

It was so good to be home again after returning to Hawai‘i in the Spring of ’89. San Diego had become my second home away from home, but after living there for five years I just couldn’t get over being homesick. So I gave up a good job with a national corporation and moved back to Hawai‘i. For the first two months I was happy as a clam until the balance in my savings account began to dwindle. I needed to find a job, and before my money ran out. That was just ten days away!

That appointment for Friday. That was just ten days away! I needed to find a job, and that she had scheduled my appointment for Friday. I thought how strange that the door was unlocked. There were other people already sitting in the large living room which had a seating capacity of about twelve to fifteen. The house was well-furnished with black Chinese, mother of pearl furniture. There was even a large screen TV for the people to watch while they waited. The view from the living room was spectacular. It overlooked the east side of the island, and you could see the beaches along the coastline, all the way down to Koko Head. As I looked around I noticed that there were two large statues (one of Jesus and Mary) on an altar in the dining room. It made me wonder whether this psychic was religious. I sat there and tried to picture what this psychic looked like as Charlene had never really told me much about her.

An hour went by as I sat patiently thinking about what the psychic would predict. I knew that the first appointment was at 8:00 so as the time drew near I began to get nervous. I wanted to back out now; I had changed my mind about this whole thing. All of a sudden some children carrying books walked out to the kitchen. It looked as though they were getting ready to go to school. As they passed the crowd of people it didn’t even bother them that there were strangers sitting in their living room.

At 8:00 sharp, a woman who appeared to be in her late 30s or early 40s came out and walked into a small room toward the back of the house. She was attractive and well-dressed, not at all what I had pictured in my mind. Her hair looked as though she just stepped out of a beauty parlor, and there was a certain glow about her. She smiled at everyone and called the first person into her office. I was really nervous now and my palms were sweaty. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go through with this.

I turned to Charlene and she said, “You can’t back out now, it’s too late.” At that moment the psychic, whose name I learned was Lan, called out “Next!” and I realized it was my turn. When I walked into her office she greeted me with a smile. She was shuffling some cards, handed them to me, and in a soft-spoken voice said, “You shuffle the cards.” I did and then handed them back to her. She turned over four cards—a Jack, a 10, a Queen, and a 7—and told me that I had come to see her about a boyfriend/husband, a job, and myself. I thought to myself she was right!

The first thing she said in her broken English and heavy foreign accent was, “You just come back from San Diego. But it’s good you go there, you grow up a lot.” Oh my God, how did she know that; she didn’t even know me.

“But you no stay here, you go to Washington, D.C.” This couldn’t be happening, I didn’t even tell her what my intentions were. I began to cry as she said, “But you no worry. Something going to happen and you come back to Hawai‘i. But you go, you go now, and you come back later.”

“You also have friend in Washington, D.C. Two good friends.” That was true. “And one of them is pregnant.” At the time neither one had told me that she was expecting a baby. “They help you. You go.” I couldn’t believe I was going to leave Hawai‘i. I began to cry.

“You have a boyfriend with initial ‘D.’” At the time I did have a boyfriend named Doug. “But he no good. He fool around on you. You no sleep with him. You have no ‘D’ in your life.” I guess she meant Doug. He was history in my life that day.

moral support. I was so happy—what are friends for? We drove to 16th Avenue in Kaimuki and she parked in front of a big, old house. We walked up the stairs and went right into the house. I thought how strange that the door was unlocked. There were other people already sitting in the large living room which had a seating capacity of about twelve to fifteen. The house was well-furnished with black Chinese, mother of pearl furniture. There was even a large screen TV for the people to watch while they waited. The view from the living room was spectacular. It overlooked the east side of the island, and you could see the beaches along the coastline, all the way down to Koko Head. As I looked around I noticed that there were two large statues (one of Jesus and Mary) on an altar in the dining room. It made me wonder whether this psychic was religious. I sat there and tried to picture what this psychic looked like as Charlene had never really told me much about her.

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“You go Washington but when you come back you meet one haole guy. You marry haole guy and have two children, one boy and one girl.” This psychic was blowing my mind. How long would I have to wait to meet this person? Could this be true?

“You good person. God love you. No worry. But be careful you might get into car accident. Be careful when you drive. And you buy new car. You be happy. No worry. You sad all the time and cry, but no cry. Your mother, she love you. She watching over you.” My mother died when I was four; why was she saying this?

“You be okay. No worry. God love you. I love you.” She handed me some tissue and touched my shoulder. I felt sad but relieved at the same time. I had found my answer.

She then asked me if I had any questions, but I was so shocked I couldn’t think of anything to ask her. I paid her my $30.00, thanked her, and walked out.

I did move to Washington, D.C. about three weeks after this psychic experience. When I called my girlfriend Patty in D.C. to tell her I was moving there, she announced to me she was pregnant. I was in total disbelief. The psychic had told me about this and she was correct.

While living in Washington I applied for, but did not get, a job working for a federal magistrate. I wasn’t so happy with the job I had so I returned to Hawai’i within eight months. The psychic was right again.

I was so happy to be home once again. I was able to find a good job within three months and I did buy a new car. I even met the most wonderful man, and yes, the psychic was correct again, he is haole. It happens when you least expect it. I just hope that this is the person I will marry and have two children with. I’m not sure if the psychic is correct about that prediction, but I’m praying that it will come out true. The pieces of the puzzle are starting to fall into place.

One thing I learned from this experience, and that is, you don’t need to depend on anyone to tell you what’s going to happen in the future. Take life as it comes. It’s never easy but smile and just take one day at a time. The best thing to do is listen to your heart.

I feel lucky about the things the psychic told me but I don’t think I’ll ever do that again. My friends sometimes call me up when they are are confused and don’t know what to do and say, “Let’s go see a psychic.” But I just tell them politely, “No thanks. I did that once and that was more than enough. It was a scary experience. If the psychic tells you something bad might happen then you might not really live life as it comes. You might look for something to go wrong in your life.” I’m where I want to be and this time I’ll stay and not because someone told me I was going to, but because I want to.
'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky
Trisha Brown

The day that I met David was dark and late. What seemed like a lifetime ago was but a few years past. I walked into a friend's house and remember this strange looking man wearing a hat with a feather on the right side. He had dark, curly hair and was an average looking man. He held in his hand a guitar which he made sing "Stairway to Heaven." When he was done he took a nut from a bag, looked up at me, and said, "Want one?" He handed me the contraption and lit the bowl. Little did I know that this was to foretell the future in full.

From that time on David would always find his way around to be by my side, no matter where I was. I was a professional dancer and traveled a lot to work the circuit. I would be all alone and out of nowhere David would appear with nothing to do but spend time in my world. He became my friend quickly and part of my extended family as well. It was not long until I depended on him to be with me forever—not as a lover, but as a friend and brother.

We spent much time getting to know one another, yet there was always an overshadowing drug problem that seemed to follow David wherever he went. One day he would be fine and the next day he would disappear for two or three days. When he returned we both knew what he had done, but I could only guess where he had been. I would look into the eyes of a desperate little boy with a problem that was beyond solving and knew that it was only a matter of time until it happened again. Even I got caught up in the world of backroom bars and the rock and roll scene. How could I blame him for the same?

Things went on like this for quite a long time. Nothing changed except the cities we were in. Time ran together and yet stood still. The losses were great. Together we made the money of a king and yet lived like paupers. In reality, however, we didn't even notice. We were too wrapped up in the scene and all it had to offer.

I'm not sure what happened or why we parted and went our own ways. I just woke up one day and the party was over. Two years would pass before I saw David again. He looked the same and talked the same, but the problem had consumed him totally. Without any doubt, the little child had gone and a hard, weathered victim was left behind. We saw each other two more times and caught up on old times. David had fallen deeper into the pit and at last couldn't climb out, or so it seemed.

On a scrap of paper David jotted down the words:

Blood tastes thicker than wine,
Choice of desperation,
Got to live the highway at night,
Got to find my destination.

On March 14, 1995, I received a phone call. David had overdosed on heroin. All alone, a broken man, David died. No one so close to me before was taken in such a tragic way. It made me reexamine my life and make changes. You never know how long your life will be. All you can do is live like there is a tomorrow. The best you can.

On a scrap of paper I jotted down the words:

Always the music man,
I was one of your biggest fans.
A son who will never know the other one,
A brother who will never get over what's done,
A mother who cries for her oldest son,
The one she nursed and held his hand,
As he became a man,
As only a mother can.
A best friend who can't see reality with his eyes,
Now all he can do is use his own to cry,
We miss him still,
We miss him now,
If only we could tell him just one more time that love that was his was mine,
If only we could have just held him and made everything wrong, fine.
Why, oh why? If only, if only.
David, I miss you. We all do.
Each of us sheds a tear for you and feels the feeling of loneliness.
Why, oh why did you give up and just say, "'Scuse me while I kiss the sky."
Goodbye.
Understanding Life through Death
Aveshenda-lynn Burke

Understanding and accepting how temporary life really is, was one of the hardest lessons I have ever learned. In eighteen short years, I have learned that change is inevitable and that time stops for no one. With every beginning there must be a corresponding end, and with the conclusion of things comes a start of new beginnings. Such a conclusion was nothing new to me, especially my grandparents; not confused by her death. My grandmother couldn’t deny that I was tormented and to suffer any longer. Although I was still sad about my loss, I understood that a life can be unexpectedly cut short, I made the conscious decision to not take life and time for granted. Before another day passed, I went home and told my parents how much I appreciated and loved them. I hugged them tightly, and I could literally feel the life in them. We all laughed and cried together. Although I was still sad about my loss, I understood that I was hugging two of the very reasons to be grateful for life.

Remembering my grandmother, I hope to be able to live as completely as she did: to build a closely knit family, run a few successful businesses, and exist in an enduring marriage. But even more so, I hope to be able to see my family grow; to be able to live as completely as she loved and cared for, afraid of the pain that I would have to endure if ever I was to lose them too.

Months passed and I still had a hard time dealing with my grandmother’s death. Every Sunday at church, I would pray on my knees asking God to help get rid of the pain in my heart and to help me make sense of her death. I never knew how hard it would be to keep the tears from swelling in my eyes or from streaming down my cheeks. I repeatedly whispered to myself, “Ave, you’re okay. Just breathe and don’t blink.” The pain did not go away and my tears continued to fall.

One day after church, I conjured up enough courage to visit her. Maybe God finally answered my prayers, or maybe I just wanted to make certain that it was not all a bad dream, but I went. When I arrived at the burial site, I slowly walked to where she was. All the things that I had always wanted to tell her while she was still alive filled my heart and mind. I found her burial spot and all my emotions began to flow out of me like the tears I had shed for so many months. I spoke to her as though she were listening to my every word. With my voice quivering, I told her that I missed her so much, that I was sorry for not telling her I loved her more often, that I was sorry for being selfish, but I still needed her in my life. The tears and words came out in cathartic unison, and I felt a little better. Staring at the crypt, I realized that although remnants of her were in the box, she was not gone but still lived inside of me and every other person’s life she had touched.

Since I was not able to tell my grandmother how much she meant to me and how much I loved her until it was too late, I made certain that I did not make the same mistake with my own parents. I made the conscious decision to not take life and time for granted. Before another day passed, I went home and told my parents how much I appreciated and loved them. I hugged them tightly, and I could literally feel the life in them. We all laughed and cried together. Although I was still sad about my loss, I understood that I was hugging two of the very reasons to be grateful for life.

Remembering my grandmother, I hope to be able to live as completely as she did: to build a closely knit family, run a few successful businesses, and exist in an enduring marriage. But even more so, I hope to be able to see my family grow; enjoy the profits of my career, and have quality time to spend with my husband, all of which my grandmother was deprived of by a shortened lifetime.

I suppose my overall purpose in life is to live righteously as well as happily. I learned from my grandmother’s death that our time in this world is much too short to be apprehensive about living life to its utmost extent. Knowing that the sun sets, and the ocean’s waves recede, I also keep in the back of my mind that my life is also just as temporary, so I must put all my energy into making it as beautiful and meaningful while I still have the chance.

Aveshenda-lynn Burke

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Reminiscing The Seasons
Mary Kaye Grieder

Our family, like most Coast Guard families, has lived in several states along the eastern and gulf coasts of the United States. We started our adventure in the muddy Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, then went on to cold Groton, Connecticut, with only two warm months a year. Next duty station was delightful Bethany Beach, Delaware, which was filled with old family farms and open spaces. We ventured on to very crowded Portsmouth, Virginia, where we experienced the pleasures of buying our first home. Finally we are in paradise, Honolulu, Hawai‘i, at the end of our twenty years in the Coast Guard.

As we have gone through each of these military adventures I often reminisce about my childhood homeplace, Shinnston, West Virginia. My childhood family who lived in the same place for over fifteen years consisted of Mom (Betty), Dad (Bob), and their five beautiful daughters: Mary Kaye, the firstborn, who carried most of the household responsibility; Rosalyn, second, who was always ready to hide till work was finished; Jan who was always ready to eat (her favorites were caterpillars and coal); Karen, who was soft spoken with a willing attitude; and Tina, the baby, whom we all coddled.

Our modest, two-bedroom home was situated on top of a large hill surrounded by four other homes with encompassing fields, trees, and a brook at the bottom of the hill. Our one-acre yard was filled with three cherry trees, a walnut tree, a lilac tree, a crabapple tree which was Roz’s hiding place, and smack in the middle of the back yard, a huge blue spruce. This was our domain.

Each season furnished us with a different territory to explore. In spring-time the small brook overflowed as the winter snow melted and provided us with a place to race our marked sticks. The trees soon brought forth an array of blossoms that promised us cherries, walnuts, apples and a fragrance which often filled my heart with joy. Dad and Mom always marked the garden rows with care as we dropped the seeds into the small holes that we had made. The fields around us plowed ready for the planting of corn often left a rich smell of fresh earth in the air. Calves, piglets, chicks, and birds voiced their newborn freedom early in the morning. Summer-time came with hot, lazy days of lying under the cherry trees with my sisters watching the squirrels romp in the blue spruce. We often argued over whose turn it was to mow the grass or pick up the twigs and rocks from the acre yard. Ah! The smell of fresh mown grass. Ah! The cool feeling of the summer shower after our hard work. Ah! Watching the blossoms turn into tomatoes, corn, apples, cherries, and walnuts.

Autumn came quickly wearing the awards of our summer labor! Smell the freshly cut hay! The woods around our home wore layers of leaves perfect for long walks. Families busied with the picking of corn, cherries, tomatoes, pumpkins, apples, and shucking of walnuts for fudge. After our hard work we built a huge bonfire where we roasted corn in their husks.

My favorite season as a child was wintertime. Who would be the one to awaken to the first snow of the season? Who would smell the crisp, clean air as they awoke from their bearlike slumber? At the window we’d gaze out asking, “Is it there?” Our eyes were frozen on the brightness of the fresh snow. The trees wore snow on their branches like a lady wears her white lace shawl. A blanket of whiteness glittered as the sun shone on its unspoiled beauty for no one had touched the new fallen snow.

We rushed to dress and finish breaking fast so we could be the first to touch the beauty Heavenly Father had left for us. We listened to the crunch of the snow under our boots and watched our warm breath turn into small clouds as we exhaled heavily from running backwards as we formed our footsteps in the pureness of the fresh snow.

I often wish my children could experience the wonder of being in the same area for more than three years. After each move I ponder about my children. Would they benefit more from life if we were a non-military family? Not! I look at my boys and I see three well-adjusted, normal children. Each time we move our family has grown stronger. The boys are always filled with questions before each move. Brian, my thirteen-year-old, asked, “Is there baseball?” Michael, my ten-year-old, asked, “Will we live in grass huts?” Dennis, my five-year-old, asked, “Can I bring my blanket?”

My stationary childhood was only a small piece of such a great world. Our family has shared so many memories while we experienced new cultures and customs. We have seen beautiful mountains, rivers, people, and oceans. New friends are made quickly and old friends always live in our hearts. The areas have new foods to try and different music to fill our ears with pleasure. Most of all we know we can depend on each other. Places we live don’t matter as much as how our family faces the new adventure.
I was only six when my father drove us down that narrow dirt road. Sitting between my parents in the front seat of our four-door Chevy, I sat there quiet as a ghost, trying my hardest not to disturb his concentration while my siblings played footsie in the back seat. When we finally reached our destination, we were all so thrilled. Jumping for joy, Lloyd, the eldest yelled, “Last one out is a rotten egg.” Sitting between two adults sure made it hard for me to rush out of the car. This place was heaven in mom’s eyes, since she didn’t have to worry about us kids being run over by any moving cars. Since there were none, only ours.

This secluded place my dad brought us to was a farm. Not an animal farm but an unchoi and watercress farm. There were many rows, or what we called “patches,” the size of our classroom. So in due time, we started referring to this place as “the unchoi patch.” In the early years, my parents made a policy that the younger kids were not allowed to work in the patch. But we still had chores. Our job was to count and keep an accurate tally of bunches that were made.

After a while, the unchoi patch became a daily routine. Every weekend, holiday, and most weekdays after dad came home from his regular civil service job, we would load our little red Toyota truck with our packed lunch and head to the farm. No one really complained. I guess we just didn’t know any better.

Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t always work and no play. My parents loved to watch Japanese movies, like Zatoichi, the blind swordsman, and The Lone Wolf and Child. So whenever it came to town, my dad would always make it a point that we finish work early and catch the matinee. My dad also took us fishing and I still remember the first fish I ever caught. It was a balloon fish the size of a basketball.

By the time we reached intermediate school age, my parents graduated us from counting bunches to working in the field. I can still picture my first day. I wore long pants and a long sleeved button front shirt over my shorts and tank top, rubber gloves, socks, rubber boots, plastic apron, and a straw hat. It was a frightening day for me, but at the same time it felt exciting. I guess the excitement was due to just knowing that I wasn’t a little girl anymore. This excitement did end by the time I entered high school. In fact, by then I felt embarrassed.

Embarrassed to be seen with my parents, riding in the back of our old beat-up Toyota truck, and feeling ashamed of what we did for a living. I know it isn’t a bad occupation to be in but when you were in high school and your friend’s parents had business types of jobs, it sure made me feel like a small potato.

My embarrassment did end when we lost our lease and our lives as farmers came to a close. But when you’re young, you don’t realize that those were the good old days until they are actually gone. The only thing you can do now is sit still with your friends under the avocado tree and reminisce about what you did when you were little. I may not be a farmer today, but the old habits have not changed much. I still work those long hours, but by my own choice.
In my opinion there are fewer things better to eat than broiled lobster. I salivate whenever I think about sinking my teeth into a melt-in-your-mouth, golden broiled lobster served with clarified butter on the side. Yet it has been years since I indulged myself to the enjoyment of this crustacean simply because I cannot bear thinking about the brutal way that a defenseless lobster is done in for my dining pleasure. You see, to properly prepare a lobster for eating, it must either be immersed in boiling water while it is alive, or cut in half also while alive. I'm not bothered by the idea of killing fish or shrimp, although I won't eat red meat either. So it's no wonder then that time after time I find myself ordering the "Catch of the Day," or scampi instead of the longed-for lobster. Over the years, I have prided myself on being able to go through life never having to kill another lobster to satisfy my appetite. Yet, last night I was party to the very kind of cruelty that had kept me from enjoying this delicacy.

There we were—all fourteen of us—dressed in our chefs' uniforms in the sterile, stainless steel environment of the Ohelo kitchen. It was another lab session of the International Cuisine class. We had just completed a lesson in making stocks. We stood at our freshly cleaned work tables and cutting boards when the chef said, "Now you will learn how to prepare lobsters. Everyone get a lobster from the front refrigerator." I had been dreading this moment and now that it was here a feeling of mild nausea mixed with resignation grew. It was the same feeling that I remember having in high school Biology class when we were told that we would be dissecting frogs. Now, as then, I hung back. The rest of the class rushed over to the container eager to get the biggest lobster. Fortunately, the class had been divided into seven teams of two, so my partner Ned fetched our specimen. He returned and placed it on our cutting board. Sure enough it was alive, legs and antennae moving, claws bound with thick rubber bands. I grimaced, not wanting to touch the poor thing. Ned, realizing my reticence, carried on as I watched. He first placed the lobster on a scale to determine its weight category. After that he turned it onto its back to determine its sex. We had a female. Then he turned her back over and proceeded with the gruesome task.

A small white kitchen towel covered the body of the lobster as the bright carbon steel of his chef's knife split the lobster's head in half. He then turned the body around and finished the cut, applying pressure as he ran his knife down its shelled back. In an instant there it was lying in half, its insides exposed and its antennae and legs still moving. Although I didn't say a word, my head was filled with a jumble of distressing thoughts, feeling so sorry for a creature who for all I knew doesn't feel pain. But I continued watching as Ned cleaned and prepared our lobster for broiling. He removed the stomach sac then laid pats of sweet butter on both halves of the lobster. Seconds later into the broiler it went. My astonishment reached a new height as I witnessed this broiling lobster rise up like the mythical phoenix from the ashes. I'm sure that it had more to do with the effect that intense heat has on muscles than the poor lobster's last grasp for life, but it still gave me goose bumps.

To say that after all the emotional turmoil I had just experienced, that I did not eat the lobster, would be a lie. Instead, I rationalized that although I personally did not wield the instrument of its death, being a witness justified my partaking in its consumption. But even more, I thought that since we'd taken its life it would be a waste not to eat it. So I thanked it for giving its life so that I might enjoy it. And with great relish I ate it.

I suppose a conclusion that could be drawn is that I enjoy eating lobster more than I abhor the killing of it. I'd say that it's a bit more complicated, entwined with ideas and feelings not fully understood by me most of all. This event more than anything clearly illustrates the conflict between some of my long held beliefs, and shows me that I'm still learning about who I am, and what I believe in.
"Ladies and gentlemen, now for the act you've all been waiting for."

A hush fell over the crowd, and the sound of an occasional nervous giggle broke the silence.

"The amazing Kerrie will now attempt what has never been done before. Drum roll, please." The lights dimmed, and I, the Amazing Kerrie, was in the spotlight just waiting for my cue. I would be making history! The first person on the planet to . . . .

"Kerrie Kikkawa, for the last time, are you ready to read the next sentence?" I sensed a tiny bit of hostility in the way Mrs. Y had said that.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I guess I wasn't paying attention." I hoped I sounded like I really was sorry. I put on my best lost puppy face and crossed my fingers.

"The next sentence." Oh boy, I knew when she used that no nonsense tone of voice she meant business.

"You may think that I'm going to let you get away with not reading in front of the class, but not this time Miss Kikkawa." Mrs. Y was young, pretty, and smart, but oh my gosh, I really wanted to push her over a cliff at that moment.

These fresh-out-of-college teachers; who did they think they were anyway? I wished I was anywhere but at my wobbly wooden desk in Mrs. Y's fourth grade class. I felt even more insignificant than usual as I sat in my cold, plastic chair. I would've even traded to be in Mrs. Lake's class (who, by the way, was affectionately nicknamed the Gas Chamber because of her occasional bodily emissions). At least she would never have humiliated me in this fashion.

"Kerrie, I know that you've been getting help from Mrs. Sato with your reading and she says that you can read just as well as everyone else, if you just put your mind to it."

Why did she have to announce that to everyone? It was bad enough that they all thought that I was a retard already.

Everyone knew Mrs. Sato held "special" reading classes for slow learners. It was then that I got that all too familiar feeling—the bitter taste of bile rising from my throat to the insides of my mouth. I wanted to run away and be sick at the same time. Looking at all of those smug little faces sitting around me, I wanted to stand up and scream at them that I knew what they were saying behind my back. But I was no retard. It wasn't my fault that I couldn't read like everyone else. What had Mrs. Sato called it, des-something or other? Dyslexia, that's what it was. Something to do with not seeing what everyone else saw. I guess my brain just wanted to be original or something. Why couldn't all my teachers be like Mrs. Sato? She understood. It wasn't like I didn't understand what they were talking about or even what they were reading, I just couldn't read the words on the page.

My life, in the academic sense, up until that time, had consisted of one complex lie after another. For many years, I had gotten by in school by remembering what other children read aloud in class, and, when called upon, I would just recite what I remembered. If I recited the wrong thing, I would tell the teacher that I had not been paying attention to what section we were doing.

The general consensus among my previous teachers was that I was lazy, a daydreamer, or just very "slow" intellectually. I had used every excuse in the book to explain why I couldn't copy or read things off the chalk board. I can remember telling my mother that I couldn't see the board from where I sat in class. My mom ended up taking me to the eye doctor at least four times in a single school year. The guilt I felt from making my mother spend money on the visits to the doctor was nothing when compared to the shame I felt because I couldn't read. I had no excuses left when the eye doctor wrote a note to the teacher asking her to place me in the front row of the class.

In the middle of my third grade year, my school counselor suggested to my mother that they do an academic evaluation on me to determine what level I was functioning on. They ran a series of written and oral examinations on me. For the first time in my life I knew what a lab monkey felt like. Sure, I wasn't poked and prodded in the physical sense, but my intellect and self-esteem took a real beating.

After a month of testing, they told my mom and me that I suffered from a condition known as dyslexia. People who have this disorder usually have a missing connection between what they see and the message that is sent to the brain. Most dyslexics can't tell the difference between an A and an E when these letters are written down on paper. In very severe cases, numbers and letters can't be distinguished and end up being written upside down and backwards. I fell into the borderline severe category. At that time, most people had never heard of dyslexia and ignorantly thought that people who suffered from it were retarded. I was lucky. My school counselor was well-informed and up-to-date on learning disorders. I was immediately placed in a remedial reading class. Unfortunately, I was too young to understand what was wrong with me and only knew that I wasn't normal like my friends.

After the first day I started in remedial reading class (which I later found out the other kids called RR or retard s room), I never wanted to go back to school again. During lunch recess that day, I remember being asked why I went to class with the
"mental" kids. The only thing I could think to tell the other kids was that I had been assigned to help the teacher as a monitor as punishment for not paying attention in class. I truly felt sick to my stomach telling lies to cover up the truth. The kids accepted that for the first week, until one of the girls in my homeroom overheard the counselor talking to my remedial reading teacher in the office. After that I was labeled not only a liar, but also a retard. I suddenly discovered the meaning of the word "outcast." Never had I felt as alone and dirty as I did at that moment. I felt that deep down inside I was the same kid that everyone had liked and wanted to play make-believe games with before it became known that I couldn't read. It was obvious that it was no longer acceptable to be my friend. To be friends with me meant that they were also retards. Only a few brave souls dared to still be seen playing with me.

I eventually began to take refuge in the library. It was the only place I felt safe from the taunts and jeers of my peers. It's funny how the only place I felt free was the last place anyone would have thought to look for me. I loved to look at the books. I loved everything about books: the way they felt, the new papery smell some books left on my hands, and I especially liked books that contained lots and lots of words. Wonderful, beautiful words. I would spend the entire lunch recess looking at all the books. I kept telling myself that one day I would read every single book in that library. The librarian would always ask me why I'd check out books that it was obvious I could not read. My answer would always be the same: "I need to make sure that this is the book I want to read." One day I was going to be able to read, and I wanted to be sure that the books I read were at least a hundred pages long and had no pictures.

The next year of my life I spent teaching my brain to see words in a whole new light. I think that if you were to look hard enough you could actually see the light bulb shining above my head. When I think about it now, I know that year was tougher on my older sister than it was on me. She got into more arguments and near-fights trying to defend me from others who still insisted on publicly ridiculing me. She became my hero and savior. In that year's time I wasn't the only one to learn a few of life's lessons. Many of my classmates took the time get to know me and to try in their own childlike way to understand why I was different. It validated my own existence to know that others were finally trying to see beyond my exterior layer. When the moment of truth finally arrived on that fateful day in Mrs. Y's classroom, suddenly it hit me; the words on the page actually made sense. I felt as if I had been hit by a ton of bricks. The realization that I no longer had to lie or hide to be like everyone else lifted the shackles from my feet and the burden off my back.

"Kerrie, are you still with us? Read the next sentence please." Okay, just take a deep breath and try to read it right. The worst that can happen is that everyone will laugh at you (not like they haven't done that before). Take it slow and easy. If you can just get the first couple of words you'll be all right. Well, here goes nothing.

"Th... e, the, the C-A-T, cat, the cat, ran, the cat ran into, th... e, the, house. Wait, I can read it. The cat ran into the house."

"Thank you. Jon, will you please read the next sentence... ."

Stop the press! I just read that whole sentence by myself! Big deal, you might be saying to yourself, but to me I had just overcome the most difficult obstacle in my young life. From that point on, I would no longer have to be afraid of words or numbers. I could read.

I had gained much of the knowledge of human nature that would and has carried me through the past seventeen years of my life. The patience of a teacher who believed in me and made me believe in myself and the love of an older sister, who restored my faith in all that is good in the world, were the simple acts of kindness that have helped me to become the person I am today. From that experience I not only learned how to read, but I realized that knowledge comes not only from books and words, but also from being on the jungle gym of life. Plus, I learned that C-A-T spells "cat."
nineteen eighty nine was a rough year. My 14 year old daughter told me she was going to go live with her Dad and I couldn’t stop her. I could no longer afford the townhouse we had been living in because I no longer received child support. My boss of seven years was promoted and moved to Germany and I was out of a job. And I turned 40—all in a six month period. I was close to a nervous breakdown.

Certain things had to be done and I did them. I love my daughter, but she was a responsibility I sometimes didn’t feel up to, so I sent her to her dad with my love and the understanding that she could come home. I moved into a room in a friend’s house. I was afraid of being unemployed, so I took the first job offered to me. And I decided being forty wasn’t so bad.

Now, with nothing in my life safe and secure, everything changed, and virtually no direction, I thought of Maui. I had been there with friends several years before to go diving. We had stayed in Kihei and dived off Lahaina, Ka’anapali, and Makena. I remember thinking as we drove down Kihei Road one night, “I could live here.” Not “I want to live here” or “Maybe someday I will live here,” but “I could live here.” Kihei was comfortable, a livable sort of town. At the time, however, moving there wasn’t an option, or even a dream. It was only a passing thought.

About a year after my daughter left I started to question the way I was living and wondered if I should make changes. I didn’t know what I was looking for, other than direction. I visited friends in Kihei and stayed with them over a long weekend.

Water always calms me and walking clears my head. Kihei has miles and miles of beaches and I walked every one. I didn’t try to think. I didn’t try to solve problems. I was depressed, restless, and yet also a bit excited about not having to answer to anyone.

Kamaole Beach is quiet, fragrant, and beautiful in the early morning. A rock presented itself for my seat and another for my feet. I watched the water come in and go out. Over and over and over. The continuous calmness calmed me. As thoughts came and went, bits and pieces of insight surfaced and submerged. “Just make do” came up again and again. But I always had. I did what needed to be done, followed instructions, played by the rules, and did what was expected of me. But what was expected of me now? Who expected it? Family? Society? Me? Something else began to surface, but I couldn’t identify it.

A couple on their honeymoon strolled by. They laughed and talked, enjoying each other’s company. (I really didn’t need that.) He took a picture of her, then she took a picture of him. I volunteered to take a picture of both of them. They told me it would be their first photo together on Maui. They would remember me, the lady that took their picture on beautiful Maui. I didn’t want to be just a memory. They walked on and I was left with another thought: “Don’t be content to make do, make the best of it.”

I had become a part of their vacation, their new beginning, their lives. I wanted a new beginning and a new life for myself.

Since there was nothing much left of my former life (mother, homemaker, long-time valued employee, youth) I had nothing to lose by starting over. I was responsible only for myself. I didn’t need to consult anyone, nor did I have to consider how it would affect anyone. This would be my decision. No approval needed, no applause needed. I would do something just for me, to please myself. I decided to move to Maui.

My friends in Kihei offered to help bring over my household goods. I rented an “ohana” unit from friends of these friends, a half block from the beach. Things were falling into place.

I didn’t ask my best friend, my boss, my daughter, or anyone else for their opinion of my decision. I simply told them I was moving to Maui. It was a wonderful feeling. I had taken control of my life and future, moving on my feelings, making my decisions.

I quit my job without remorse. I gave notice on my room, and sold furniture, housewares, and “old life” stuff. I updated my resume, collected references, and bought a ticket to Maui and my new life.
Life Is a Rainbow
Jeanette Mukaida

These are the green and gray layers formative, growing and searching. I grew up in the post World War II period in Honolulu, of blue collar parents who attended school only through the sixth and eighth grade. They came of age in the depression era, and both were forced to leave school, as did many of their classmates, to help support their family.

A college education for their three daughters was not the priority for this family; rather, they hoped that we would marry someone who would take care of us for the rest of our lives. This generally meant a lifetime role as a helpmate whose main concerns were caring for the children and preparing meals daily, certainly not being an equal to the husband in earning capacity, education, or respect. A full-time job was a diversion for women until marriage occurred.

Little did we know that by the early sixties, with the discovery of birth control pills, coupled with the desire to attain a higher standard of living in Hawai‘i, more women would enter the male-dominated workforce.

Throughout my long career at one of Hawai‘i’s largest banks, there were opportunities to further my education past my high school diploma. In the beginning, only a handful of women graduated from college; most chose nursing, business school, or worked right after high school. However, in the thirty years since, it seems that the majority of new hires are college graduates.

I had so many excuses for delaying this endeavor over the years, such as the children needed a mother in the evenings and weekends; I’m too old to go to school; I needed time to relax from my job, not more stress; I do not have the money or time to go to college; and I enjoy my job and co-workers, so I don’t need a degree. In retrospect, I was unmotivated because of other events in my life taking priority over school.

These are the blue and rosy layers representing serenity and hope for the future.

In the last seven years, my children married, I survived a divorce, and last year gave up a long career as a result of downsizing and management reorganization. I’ll never forget my mother’s sad remark to me when told of my impending divorce; she asked, “Who will take care of you now?” This time, I laughed and reassured her that I was quite capable of supporting myself now that the children were grown. Meanwhile, during my job hunting efforts during the last few months, I realize that most companies require a college degree, not only for mid-management positions but for entry level as well.

So now here I am, with no excuses left and with a compelling reason to attain a college degree in either Accounting or Computer Science. My college degree will be the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Twenty-four Hours in the Life of a Casual Bystander
Wendy S. Murwin

I sat on the damp stones overlooking Waikiki beach. Trying to collect my thoughts, Iiggled my toes in the hot sand. The smell of barbecue permeated the air, sweet and appetizing, reminding me I had not eaten in several hours. Behind me I could hear the sounds of children playing in the park. Their shrieking laughter punctured the air, reminding me of my own childhood. It was hard to believe I had ever been that carefree, devoid of any concern but that of having fun. Before me I watched my dog, like a child himself, romping ecstatically up and down the beach, faster and faster, up and down until he was little more than a blur with a lolling tongue and a wildly waving tail. Iiggled my toes in the sand some more and glanced around at my surroundings, a beautiful blue green ocean, gently waving palm trees. As unhappy as I was, I had to admit I could not have chosen a more beautiful place to be homeless.
As I sat listening to the children and watching my dog, I reflected on the mess I had made of my life, failing college, getting kicked out of the military. These were just a few of the mistakes I had made over the course of the past several years. I had no one to blame but myself for my current situation. Like a casual bystander I had stood by and watched my life skid out of control, not caring enough to do anything about it.

As I sat on those grey stone steps that would become my home for the next several weeks I made a few halfhearted attempts at being upbeat. In addition to my dog and my clothes I had packed enough food to last the evening and a blowtorch to cook it with. As the day wore on into late afternoon and the happy cries of the children slowly ceased—the park was almost empty now, and all that remained was the lingering odor of barbecue and the litter left by careless people—I occupied myself with cooking cheeseburgers with my propane torch. As I set about this I pretended I was on an extended camping trip. I told myself I at least had the comfort of being able to call.

As the late afternoon eased into early evening with a lovely lingering sunset (for several seconds the sun seemed to cling to the edge of the earth, reluctant to go down), I contemplated my relationship with my mother. Our relationship had been stormy throughout my childhood. I could still vividly recall the harsh words exchanged during heated arguments. Now years later, we had somehow managed to set aside our tremendous differences and build a close relationship, a relationship I valued deeply.

I knew this latest incident would cause her great disappointment in me. For a moment I became a child again, feeling guilty and inadequate for having failed to live up to her expectations. I shoved those feelings aside. I was an adult now. The only expectations I had to live up to were my own. I resolved to call her in the morning. It was getting late and I was exhausted. I lay down on the cool sand beside my dog and promptly fell asleep.

I awoke the next morning abruptly; the sun had risen completely and was blazing on my face. Feeling like a bug pinned under a magnifying glass, I scurried into a shady area in the park and watched the activities. Once again the park was in full swing: sunbathers, screaming children, and my dog in the thick of it, scattering birds, sand, and children alike as he raced around the beach park. This, he said with sparkling eyes and wagging tail, is the life! I was not so sure.

I remembered I had to call my mother, so with a sigh of resignation, I prepared myself for a lengthy lecture and headed for the payphone located in the middle of the park. As I dialed the phone I could hear someone playing bongo drums. The monotonous tune seemed to be saying You are homeless, You are homeless repeatedly, as if it were mocking me. I stuck my finger in my free ear, attempting to block it out. The phone rang several times and my mother finally answered.

"Hello?" she said pleasantly. "Hi mom, it's me!" I was trying to sound cheerful.

"Wendy?!" Her tone of voice changed immediately. She was clearly upset with me. "I called your apartment. They told me you don't live there any more. What's going on?!"

"Well, I'm kind of homeless right now," I said lightly, trying to sound casual.

"Wendy, when are you going to do something with your life? Don't you care about your future?" She said this warily.

We'd had this conversation dozens of times.

"Really Mom, this isn't so bad. I'm sort of having fun. It's an adventure!" I attempted my camping trip line on her, but she remained as unconvinced as I was.

After speaking to my mother for several more minutes and promising to do something with my life, I wandered over to a park bench located in a shady area and sat down. Enviously I watched families, lovers, friends enjoying their lives and enjoying each other. I began to realize it was time for me to start doing the same.

I did not want to wake up one day and realize I had wasted the time that God had granted me, be it short or long. It was a gift to be accepted gratefully.

Being homeless was a traumatic event, one I hope to never repeat. What I gained from the experience, however, is immeasurable. Being homeless served as both a catalyst and a wakeup call for me to get my life together, before it was too late. In addition, my perception of the homeless was forever changed. Previously I had viewed them with a mixture of pity, and—I am ashamed to admit—contempt. I never thought it could happen to me. I now understand the saying, "There but for the grace of God go I."
When I was 19, I canceled the “good” Southern California life of friends, family, a job, plus an approved application for the payment plan on a new Corvair, to travel abroad on a third-class ocean liner with a one-way ticket bound for the tropical isles of Hawai‘i.

Packing my worldly possessions didn’t take long. A bicycle, one suitcase crammed with shorts, shirts and bathing suits, plus a stuffed monkey named Charley, were all that seemed necessary. The idea of a long vacation became an obsession when my mind flashed through reruns of those exciting Bruce Brown surfing flics. His clips of shapely waves, handsome surfers, deep suntans, and lazy, sunny beach life spurred on my dreams of joining the carefree life of the surf “bum.”

The voyage may never have happened without my partner and major driving force to the scheme, Christina, whom I called Chris. At the time, neither of us had any purpose or direction in life; thus we fueled each other on into this glamorous escapade without hesitation or fear.

Our friendship began while we both were working in a clerical department of a large insurance company. We had other friends in common, but when they heard of our plan, they would only roll their eyes in amazement and then tell us that we were crazy.

Luckily, it was the beginning of the 1960s, and our craziness was right in style. Yes, this new 60s era of anti-establishment, of downplaying materialism, gave each of us the license to “do our own thing.”

I am smiling as I recall those last days of preparation before boarding the now-retired President Wilson ocean liner. Anxiety attacks in the form of ceaseless chatter, ridiculous dancing, and slapstick giddiness must have been annoying to those around us.

At last it was the day to cast off. The families were present at dockside forcing brave smiles as we all joked and hugged to a bon voyage; but there were telltale glances of worry and disappointment. Chris and I hurried on board anyway; and after finding our cabin on the lowest deck next to the engine, we scurried back to the rail to fling dozens of pastel paper streamers towards the dock and to shout messages that were only drowned by the blasting of the horns. We were so caught up in the gaiety, although I do recall feeling a slight moment of sadness as I glanced at my mom clutching her Kleenex.

The voyage was wonderful. It didn’t take long to explore the vessel because third class was limited, and we were not allowed on the two top first-class decks. However, this sparked a rivalry; and running through on a “raid” was good fun. We had to laugh when we saw people from first-class crossing down to our deck claiming our parties were much more lively.

At times the seas were rough. We exaggerated and laughed at our clumsiness in walking and finding our sea legs, but we felt less woozy by the second day. Our decks didn’t have a swimming pool, but there was ongoing shuffleboard, ping pong, and food. First impressions of fellow passengers were that the majority were very old, very stuffy, and very odd. Two out of three, maybe, but I now realize that we were probably the ones who were odd.

At last we sighted land and cruised into Honolulu Harbor. It was a pleasure to dock at Aloha Tower and to smell the sweet flowers and to watch the kids dive for coins. Somewhere, I still have that photo taken of us among the crowd of passengers as we watched the lovely hula dancers from the ship’s rail. I remember how we felt so special with all the attention. Once the gangplank lowered, we peddled on our bikes straight for the beach at Waikiki.

The first month in the Islands was truly a vacation, complete with new friends and daily access to a host of beautiful beaches. After finding a very small apartment at $80 a month, Chris and I took side jobs at night as waitresses, and in the early morning we would drive with our new friends out to the country or wherever the surf was up.

Life was great for me, but it took Chris only one month to decide that she wanted to return home to be with her mom. This news was hard to take. Part of my dilemma was in not having a return ticket, but I think it was more the issue of pride that caused me concern. So I stayed, got a better job, and made it alone.

Two years passed, and I found myself signing onto the all-girl crew of a 45-foot private yacht sailing to Hilo, the Marquises and Tuamoto Islands, and finally Tahiti.

Memories from these years are now buried in the cobwebs of my mind, but as I attempt to recall and reflect, I am amazed at the course of events.

The “hippies” and “flower children” were such a blessing to us adventurous souls in the 1960s, enabling us to drift with an open mind to new lands, like leaves blowing in the wind. Pains from the hard times, prejudices, and pangs of loneliness are gone, but I can still remember many great experiences I had in those few wonderful years of doing my own thing.
For the Love of Cats
Velynda S. Shults

A persistent pounding on the gate gave Mary a start as she dutifully weeded her back yard. She rushed to open the gate to find one of her neighbors waiting there with a pleading expression. “We have a cat we can’t keep. She’s injured and we want someone who will take good care of her.” The neighbor went on to explain the dilemma she had with the cat and the fact that her landlord wanted it gone. “There’s something wrong with the cat’s shoulder; we aren’t sure what happened,” the neighbor explained. Mary immediately went with the lady to assess the cat’s condition. She was unable to see what was wrong because the cat’s front leg was smothered in a bandage from the shoulder down. Mary said, “I want to help you out here, but I already have eight cats! I don’t know if I can afford to take care of another one.” The neighbor pleaded her case further, and Mary finally gave in. She took the injured cat to the vet immediately. When the vet removed the bandage, he found that there was actually no leg to begin with. Obviously, the neighbor had just wanted to be rid of the cat. Mary felt tricked and disappointed that so few people were willing to take responsibility for a crippled cat. Today the three-legged cat, Skunk, is healthy and gets around fine.

When you approach Mary’s house, it seems like any other house. The front yard is nicely landscaped and the appearance of the house is nothing out of the ordinary. However, the license plate on the Ford Explorer parked in the driveway gives it all away—“CAT CAB.” Yes, Mary is a cat fanatic. Her fear, in that instance, of taking on one more cat seems silly to her now. She is now the frantic overseer of nearly forty cats, but somehow she survives. There are aspects of her life that suffer greatly. The conditions she lives in are mind-numbing to any ordinary person. Her house is divided into two parts. The front is a three bedroom/one bath rental. She lives in the back part of the house which is equivalent to an enclosed lanai, and yes, she shares this limited space with her cats. Her living area consists of a small bathroom and bedroom in one corner and the rest of the space is used as a kitchen/living area. The living area is ruled by the cats. They eat, sleep, and play wherever they please. The antique furniture that lines the walls has seen better days. “I learned the hard way that everything has to be cat-proofed before it can be put in this room.” She shook her head, “Believe it or not, I just cleaned this mess up this morning.” I scanned the room. It was impossible not to notice the chaos that the cats caused. Newspapers, magazines, towels and cat litter were scattered everywhere. It was difficult to see the cement floor that lay beneath the clutter. Litter boxes are scattered around the room in hopes that the cats would be considerate enough as to use them.

“There usually aren’t many ‘misses.’” She assumes that the ‘misses’ occur when the litter boxes are occupied and the poor cat just can’t wait. The stench in the place is overwhelming at first. The smell of cat urine dominates the room. My first instinct was to hold my nose and run right back out the door, but out of good manners I stuck it out. Eventually my nose adjusted, but not completely.

When I asked her how the “cat count” went from eight to forty she chuckled. “Unfortunately, people know me as the ‘cat lady’ and they assume I pass the time by taking care of cats!” It seems that even though she loves cats, she doesn’t go looking for them. Nearly every cat that she takes care of now was either dropped on her doorstep by some “well-meaning” neighbor or a stray that heard through the grapevine about a place where the cat food is free and the natives are friendly. She doesn’t, however, resent the cats’ invasion of her home. She has lovingly taken the time to name each and every cat that has “chanced” upon her doorstep and always takes the time to tame the strays. I challenged her to recite the names for me and she laughed. “Boy, it’s like trying to name the fifty states!” She paused to think. “Let’s see—the outside strays are Big Guy, Little Guy, Bobcat, White Boy, Eddie, and Fourth. I keep Clinton, Christian, and Uli Uli in a large storage cage in back because they pee when they’re inside. There’s Lucky, Asti, and Nicki in the [fenced in] backyard. Inside—oh boy,” she squinted in thought, “Skunk, Jakesbeer, Ebeneezer, Edith Ann, Emilie, Schaffer, Sidney, Beretania, Einstein, Campell, Marco, Polo, China, Froto, Sam, Pippen, Gimley, Morgan, Wesley, Pete, Simon, Corkscrew, Mum cat. I think that’s it.”

Mary works as a research attorney. At times her workload is more than tripled. With nearly forty cats and herself to care for, her daily routine has to be honed to a science. “In the morning,” she said, “food and water dishes are checked, a mental ‘cat count’ is taken, and Pete and Simon are fed.” I looked at her, eyes wide and eyebrows raised. “I know it sounds gruesome, but they don’t feel anything,” she went on to explain that both Pete and Simon had been in accidents that left them with paralyzed back legs. “If I don’t pee them twice a day, their bladders will explode,” she said as if resigned to her fate. Her nightly ritual is more of the same.

Before I left, I asked her if I could experience the ordeal she put herself through twice a day with Pete and Simon. She was happy to oblige me, but insisted that I join in. I wasn’t sure what I had gotten myself into, but figured if she can do it every day it won’t hurt me to try.
She laid Simon on the bathroom counter with his back end aimed at the sink. “You have to feel for the bladder first,” she instructed, “and then squeeze.” I felt around on Simon’s lower body until I reached the hard ball that I had to assume was his bladder. I began to squeeze and nothing happened. “Squeeze harder,” she coached, “remember, they don’t feel anything.” I squeezed harder, hoping that I wasn’t harming the poor cat. Finally, a small stream of urine escaped, and I was glad to be done with the duty. She graciously relieved me of having to do the second cat, Pete. After experiencing the care she took when she did Pete, I felt a new respect for her that I hadn’t realized before. This gruesome task that any ordinary person would kill to avoid, she did with all the compassion of a mother caring for a sick child. After I had thanked her for her time and started walking out, I paused to caress the cats that were rubbing at my legs for attention. I felt an odd emptiness inside when I realized that there were so many cats that begged for her attention every hour of the day. She is only one person and she sacrifices her time and lifestyle to give these cats the love and care that other people selfishly withheld. And she does it all for the love of cats.

English 100
Jill Makagon

A Little Star Near the Dig Dipper
Tomo Takai

Ken was my only friend whom I met under an unusual circumstance in Dairen City in Manchuria, which was called that until World War II came to an abrupt end. My family lived in the city. Dairen was one of the few international cities having a free port; therefore, people of many different races were living in a multicultural environment at that time. The once Soviet-dominated city had taken on a European style in its streets. Dairen’s climate was one of long, piercing-cold winters and short, hot summers. Today it’s called Dalian and belongs to Northeast China. My encounter with Ken was very funny. In 1945, I was a seventh grade student in high school and was learning to ride a bicycle with the help of Koto, my older sister by two years, as the summer vacation had begun. When I was on the verge of pedaling straight, a small white ball rolling over and over burst into my way. I was confounded to avert it, lost my balance, and fell down! I found myself in a piteous plight on the ground—my skirt turned up to my breast and my naked legs dotted with livid marks and blood-stained, displayed in an unladylike way. While I struggled to get myself free from under the bicycle, to my astonishment a young man pursuing the ball dashed toward me.

“Are you all right?” he asked me with his warm voice, “Didn’t you get hurt?” he asked again. It was Ken. He was kind enough to help me to my feet. A blush rose on my cheeks and I lost my tongue; my head dropped down. He was playing catch ball with his younger brother in the vacant lot next to his house. Ken’s family were my neighbors in the seaside residential area. My family were still strangers in the area since we had moved, two months before, from the upper part of the city. Ken sometimes whistled while he wandered around his house which was just opposite my house; however, I hadn’t ever talked with him. His father was the vice-principal of my high school.

Ken was a student in the eleventh grade. He had his head shaved—like all Japanese men in wartime. He wasn’t tall, about three inches taller than I. He was robust and had a square face like a brick. In those days, we had funny high school regulations. Namely, talking to the opposite sex was strictly banned. It might sound like a stupid rule nowadays, but it’s honestly true. The high school buildings for boys and girls, therefore, were at a distance from each other. Thus, I had very mingled feelings when Ken talked to me. Feeling guilty on the one hand, I felt so happy on the other hand— as a young girl, you see.

At the monumental moment at the end of the war (14 August 1945), Japan lost its reign over Manchuria: anarchy resulted. In other words, that at moment, all Japanese living in Manchuria lost our basic rights to live: we were given no guarantee of our lives, no guarantee of
our private properties, and no guarantee of tomorrow. Everybody’s sense of values was also totally destroyed and chaos resulted. The social unrest—killing, robbery, plunders, and rapes—went from bad to worse. A huge number of Japanese in Manchuria found themselves in a terribly difficult condition as if they were poor passengers on a boat drifting on the raging waves on a furious sea without a compass. The only thing we knew was that we had to return to Japan as soon as possible, but nobody could tell when.

Koto and I plus two more younger sisters had to abstain from going out like other Japanese girls did. All schools, of course, were closed. Staying at home all day along—for months—made us gradually bored and irritated.

Ken became our tutor after consultation between my mom and his father. One day in deep autumn, my mom said, “From tomorrow Ken is coming to help you with your studies so you will not be in trouble if we are able to return to Japan. I don’t know when, though.”

“Wow! That’s a great idea, mom!” I replied with keen interest, setting aside my studying. Nobody objected to her plan. We really needed something fresh to break the boring, dull, and stagnant moods at home.

The following day, Ken showed up in black trousers and a sweater in all tints of brown, with a smile on his face. As my mom prepared the big polished wooden round table for us, I reservedly took my pencils which he had put in order of length. “Oh my God!” I murmured faintly. His finger nails were neatly cut. He loved to do everything on the square like his face.

One day I asked, “Have you been to Japan?”

“Yeah! Once... when my mom died,” he said sadly. He had an elder sister who had taken care of his family.

“Sorry! I’m very sorry, Ken.” I really sympathized with him.

“It’s when I was a 5-year-old child, so I don’t remember Japan well. How about you, Tomo?” he returned the question.

“I’ve never been there—so I can’t imagine it.” I said.

“Well, I have a couple of collections of photographs of Japan’s landscapes. I’ll show you them.” As soon as he said this, he ran into his house and carried back two heavy, big books in his right arm. Even though the pictures were black-and-white because there were no colored pictures at that time, I was fascinated by them. There were various Japanese landscapes, such as national parks, lakes, mountains, and scenes of brooks and rivers. He pointed out one of the high mountain pictures covered with snow. I was deeply impressed by its sublime appearance.

“How beautiful it is!” I said.

“Yeah! This is Mt. Yarigatake. Its height is 3,820m (10,430 feet). I’d like to climb this mountain.” He gazed at it for a while and muttered to himself, “If you talk the talk, you better be able to walk the walk.”

He created a stir as if he were a small stone being thrown on the surface of a still pond. Ken was very kind and thoughtful to everybody, so his pupils—my three sisters and I—adored him. He used to keep smiling and made us laugh by cracking jokes optimistically. Besides the learning, we had a very pleasant time playing games and singing songs. He loved to sing a song with his baritone voice. My mother also loved and treated him as if he were one of the members of my family.

Meanwhile Ken and I became good friends. Although his pupils had been gradually decreasing in number, I remained as the last one because tender feelings began to grow in our hearts. We exchanged books and also talked about various things. He knew many names of the stars, so we would look up at the stars in the sky by sticking our heads out of the window.

“Do you remember the Big Dipper?” he asked.

“No, I don’t. ‘Cause you’ve taught me a lot all at once,” I replied.

He wasn’t fed up with the repeated explaining “Look at—in that direction, Tomo.” He pointed out the window to the north and said, “Can you see seven stars formed like a big dipper? That’s the one.”

“Seven stars? Like a dipper? Yeah! I found it, Ken!” I said.

“I’m wondering if we could find the
Big Dipper under the sky in Japan."
I sighed deeply.
He paused to say, "Un!... Nobody knows when, but let's keep our hope. Never give up, Tomo!" He used to try to cheer me up, and he always told me, "The important thing is to believe in yourself. You can do or you will do what you want to." His words were deeply imprinted on my mind.

Eighteen months (Aug. 1945-Feb. 1947) flew past after I had met him. We were gradually running out of food, clothes, and other necessities since we could supply nothing new except some food. The only thing that increased was his black straight hair; it grew so long that he had to push back his flowing locks on his forehead. In retrospect, Ken was a glitter in the dark days of my life like the twinkling stars in the sky. Besides, we were in the same boat under such an unusual situation; therefore, I would never forget him as central to indelible scenes in my life.

In March of 1947, my family returned to Japan at last. One day, when I came home from school, my mom said, "You've gotten a letter today," and she smiled. "Can you guess from whom?"
"A letter to me?... To me?" I couldn't guess it with ease.
"Here you are! Don't fall into a swoon, Tomo!" she said.

It was from Ken! Oh! Thank God for his safe return! Tears blurred my sight; I couldn't hold back my tears. His family came back six months after us.

Returning to Japan, Ken and I were in correspondence with each other for about twelve years (Aug. 1947 - Dec. 1959) until the accident happened. Unlike today, there were no quick means of transportation between Tokyo, where I lived, and Osaka, where Ken lived: no jet plane, no bullet train, and no express bus. Even telephones had not come into wide use. Consequently, writing a letter was the most convenient means of communication.

He neatly sent his lines to me once a week, and I wrote back to him. The bulk of his letters were written about his mountain climbing with a poetic rhetorical style; he had a taste for literature. Reading his letters and writing my replies for years made me have an interest in writing. I'm now—in the last part of my life—challenging writing in English at KCC.

In December of 1959, I got his letter as usual. It said that he had planned to come up to Tokyo, for the first time, to meet me during the new year vacation. Prior to the trip, he was to climb the mountain—Mt. Yarigatake, one of his favorites. When the radio's weather forecast described a blizzard and an avalanche warning there for the day, I wasn't worried much about him because it was his third attack at it.

His writing of our reunion in Tokyo turned out to be his last letter to me forever. He never came back from Mt. Yarigatake. After climbing his favorite high mountain, he must have tripped to the sky far beyond. A twinkling little star nearby the Big Dipper might be Ken.
A Humbling Experience
Michael Toyama

It must have been fate that David and I were riding home together that unforgettable night in December of 1991. David and I are the best of friends but we possess completely different personalities. I view David as quite intelligent, nonimpulsive, and a very good problem-solver. David had commented on many occasions that someday, somehow my temper problem would get the both of us into very big trouble. He was right.

On that crisp and chilly December night in 1991, David and I were cruising through Kaneohe town heading towards my house. I had just picked David up from Kailua and we planned to go to my house, watch some videos and catch up on old times. My Corolla was in the shop for repairs so Dad had let me borrow his new Toyota truck. I felt uneasy driving Dad's truck, but there was no other way to pick David up.

"Aye Mike, you sure are following a little close to that van aren't you?"

I loved to drive fast and to get to places I want to go very quickly. The slow moving van was testing my short patience level. In disgust, my face began to squint. I took my hands off of the wheel and my palms up in question. I yelled, "What the hell is going on. Move it!!" I could feel my blood beginning to boil because it seemed as if the van had actually slowed down. I slammed my hand on the horn and let it blare for about two seconds before I took my hand off.

"Oh shit! Where did they come from? Oh shit!" I said in horror as I saw six heads pop up to look at who had honked at them. My eyes grew wider and my jaw dropped as I looked into the van. David shook his head and didn't say a word to me. My only wish at that moment was to reverse time so that I could erase what I had just done. Too late.

The van pulled off to the side of the road and as we passed we could feel the tension between the two cars. All seven guys were staring us down and they looked pissed. I felt myself swallowing hard in fear. Sitting at the steering wheel staring me dead in the face was this huge local Hawaiian guy. He gave me such a menacing look, I felt like pissing in my pants.

"So what are we going to do Dave? Can you outrun them?"

"I guess, but I can't handle dad's truck very well on turns." I jammed my foot on the gas pedal and both of our heads snapped back as the truck accelerated explosively.

"I hope you know what you are doing," David said as his hand rose to hold onto the bar on the roof of the truck for balance.

I zoomed down the road. "Watch this, those guys are history, I know a short cut!" I jammed my foot on the gas and my truck started to rip down the road. My hiding place was on a very dark hill. There were no street lights and the moon was not shining so it was a perfect spot. I began to ascend the hill.

"Hurry up and park this thing, damn it!!"

"Okay, now where is the hand break?" "You don't need it, just park it and turn off the engine!" I pushed the truck's gear shift into park and turned the engine off. I looked up into my rear view mirror. The van had found us. I shook my head. I couldn't believe it, I wondered how they could have found us. My heart dropped into my stomach. How could I have been so stupid to get us into this mess?

I turned the truck around. The van had moved into a strategic position and blocked the entrance to the road. Out of the van popped four medium sized Hawaiian guys. The leader of the four had a bottle in his hand and he violently smashed it on the ground. The part that he held looked extremely menacing because it had sharp broken edges. He gave me the meanest look I had ever seen. He waved that deadly bottle in my direction and yelled, "Aye, what bra, you like scrap, come on punk, let's go!" I sat transfixed on that bottle in his hand.

David spoke out in a loud yet calming voice, "Aye, I'm sorry, I must apologize for my friend, he just had a fight with his girlfriend and he's not in a good mood."

"So what? That no mean you gotta honk at us. We should just kick your ass for honking at us."

"Well, yes, he's sorry for honking at you, he didn't mean to offend you in any way," replied David.

The leader stopped in his tracks. We couldn't figure out what was going on or what he was thinking. Finally, the silence was broken by the leader of the group.

"Aye, next time you guys better wise up or you goin' get lickens. And you, Japanese boy, you better learn some respect and not honk your horn or I going come ova there and kick your ass!!" We watched as he slowly turned away from us, dropped his bottle and began descending the hill back to the van. My heart was still pounding with fright as I peeled through the darkness. All the occupants of the van leered back towards David and me one last time before slowly departing on their way.

"Aye Mike, I didn't see you acting all BIG like you usually do! You better learn a lesson from this, Mike. If you don't learn to control your temper, next time you might just get your butt and my butt kicked as well. I will NEVER EVER let you forget this!" Right at that moment, I grew silent because I took David's words to heart and realized that below my tough macho exterior lay a quite fearful and spineless worm.
Hair Today Gone Tomorrow
Mina Webster

My most embarrassing moment happened in the second grade at Kaiulani Elementary School, across the famous Tamashiro Fish Market in Honolulu. I was an immigrant from the Philippines. I had arrived here in Hawai‘i at six years old and spoke no English. Because I was too old to begin school in kindergarten, I was immediately put into first grade in the middle of the school year. I had to right away assimilate into a new culture and to learn English instantly. At that time there weren’t any classes for immigrant students, I basically learned English both in school and in my neighborhood. To say the least, it was a difficult time fitting in with the other kids in school. What was to happen to me the following year had an even more dramatic impact on my life.

Teachers at Kaiulani school would periodically check for head lice throughout the year. On one of those checks, I was found with head lice. My mom was so upset after being notified of this that she did what she thought was the only solution; she shaved my head completely bald. The next few days, I was brutally teased by other kids in school as they pointed at my head, laughed and called me “bolo-head” (local slang for “bald-head”). At times I wore my blue bird cap to hide much of the baldness. To have lice was bad enough, but to be a completely bald seven-year-old girl was the most humiliating experience.

On one unbearable day, the thought of being teased again made me decide to stay home. I was afraid to tell my mother of the embarrassment of being teased at school, so I hid in my mom’s sewing room closet. Mom would normally do her sewing in the evening; however, on this particular day she decided to sew during the day. I was scared to think what she would do to me if she found me, so I held my breath, kept very still, and prayed. It wasn’t long before she noticed movement in the closet. She found me and sternly dragged me to school, all the while lecturing me on my right to be in school even with a bald head, and that I should have said something to my teacher about the teasing. What normally would have taken fifteen minutes to get to school seemed like only a minute that dreadful day.

With the teacher’s permission, my mom stood me in front of the class and demanded “Why are you teasing my daughter?” I stood there petrified, embarrassed, and feeling death was probably easier to deal with than this. I can’t remember what really happened after that, but the students, perhaps more out of shock than fear, just sat there speechless with their mouths agape as this petite, four-foot-eleven woman proceeded to scold them. I was never teased again. Looking back now, I think everyone was afraid of what my mother might do next.

My following school years still took some adjusting to; however, because of the incident with my mom in front of the class, my fellow students seemed to have a kind of respect for me. The word was out. I took my most embarrassing moment and handled it like a tough kid. If they only knew.

The lesson learned in this story? There were many. Here are only a few: hiding from the problem does not make the problem go away. Even at the worst moment of your life, there will be a tomorrow. I also learned to face adversity head on. And of course, if it wasn’t for my mom, a tough woman with very simple values, I would never have learned these lessons.
I Bribed the Security Chief
Yagun Wei

On August 16, 1990, my husband boarded a United Airlines plane, heading for Honolulu to study for his graduate degree. I was torn by mixed feelings on his departure: I was happy that our dream of going to America had come true. On the other hand, I felt empty and hopeless because I was uncertain when I would see him again. I wondered whether I would survive the frustration when it was my turn to apply for a passport.

To American people, everyone is entitled to get a passport when they want to travel abroad. It only takes a few weeks to process it. All they have to do is to visit the nearest office of the Passport Agency of the U.S. State Department with the proof of their U.S. citizenship, fill in proper forms, pay certain fees, and it is done.

However, a passport application process in China is complicated. For ordinary citizens to go abroad, besides the proof of their citizenship and birth certificates, they must first provide the crucial things of the permission and their political files from their working units, which are left to the tender mercies of the chief officials in charge.

Three months after my husband left, I applied to the President and the Party Secretary of the university where my husband and I worked for an approval to visit my husband in Honolulu. As I expected, my request was refused, and I was told to have my husband come back instead, or to resign if I insisted on going.

Resigning would make things even worse and would also mean I could have neither the approval nor my political file, which were indispensable for a passport. A political file is a record of a person's job performance and political evaluation concerning whether the person is loyal to the Communist Party, or has said anything against the Party. Political files are confidential everywhere. In our school only a few officials had access to them, but they were not allowed to disclose or make a copy of one without the permission of the Party Secretary. A copy of a political file is not valid unless it is notarized with the official red stamp.

I did resign, however, because I did not want to deal with the school authority any more, and because one friend's connection in the municipal Public Security told me that he would help me get a passport if I could get my political file. But how could I get it? None of the officials who had access to the archives would take the risk of offending their bosses in order to help me.

Then I remembered the Security Chief of the Security Department, who also had access to my political file. In the school, it was an open secret that he took bribes for anything he did, from signing his signature to stemping a seal. Whether it was his duty or routine, he would stall by claiming that the procedure was too complicated, or that he was too busy. After you offered some gifts to him, the process would be smooth and prompt. I knew he would never help me without seeing anything beneficial to him. So some kind of "lubricants" were needed in exchange for my political file. I did not know what might happen, but I decided to have a try anyway. It was my only hope. I really wished this time that he could not be too corrupted in my case.

Although I had heard a lot of stories about corruption, I myself had no experience in bribery because first I always believed in the integrity and innocence of most Chinese officials as it had been reported and advocated, and second I had believed that it was the duty of officials to serve the people.

I knew that it was not wise to bring bribery to his office, so I chose to go to his home, where things could be kept more private. Thinking of bribing the Chief made me very nervous. What if he refused to accept the bribe, and what if he exposed my attempt to the school? I would not only embarrass myself, but also I would lose the last chance to get a passport, and then there would not be a second person I could be sure of to help me.

At the grocery store across from the gate of my university, I bought a bottle of Chinese spirits named "Green Bamboo Leaves" and a package of cigarettes called "Hong Ta Shan." Both the wine and the cigarettes were very expensive, and few ordinary Chinese people could afford to buy and enjoy them. They cost me about two hundred and fifty Chinese yuan, which was one and a half of my monthly salary. A few days before I delivered the bribe, I went to see the Security Chief in his office and asked him to get my political file for me. He answered that it was out of the question for him to help me. I said nothing else, but told him that I would visit him at his home in a few days.

Most of the school faculty and staff lived on campus. The Security Chief lived in an apartment on the top floor of a new five-story building, only a hundred feet away from my apartment. I waited until eight at night, when it was dark and there would be few pedestrians on the road. I set out for the Chief's home, carrying the gifts as if I were carrying some kind of loot. Before I entered the apartment building, I checked outside to see if anyone was at his home. Through the window of his apartment, I could see that the light was on. I was delighted to see the lights: "Lucky," I said to myself, "He is at home."

The stairway was unlit, but I liked the darkness. I felt safe and lighthearted in the dark, picturing that I was going to get hold of my file with the red stamp and at
last the passport. I took two steps at one time and quickly reached the top, the fifth floor, then rang the door bell politely and waited.

Nothing happened. Maybe I should have pressed harder, I thought. I tried a second and third time. Still no one came to answer the door. I was sure that there must be someone at home, and if it was not the Security Chief himself, I could leave the gift with his wife, who was as good as the director. But why did they keep me waiting at the door? They must know it was me because the director had already got my message. I knew that he was pretending that he had no interest in my bribery. I was begging him because he had the power, and no matter how rudely he treated me, I had to swallow it. I was angry and humiliated, and wanted to turn back, but hesitated because I knew I would have to come again sooner or later. The desire to leave this school and the country was overwhelming. I said to myself that once I had my political file, I would not have anything to do with him. So I tried the doorbell two more times, and finally the door opened. It was the Security Chief himself.

The Security Chief was a veteran in his mid-forties. He was around 5'6" tall, weighed one hundred and forty pounds, and had a dark complexion. The Chief was wearing a white tank-top and blue cotton shorts but was barefoot. He was not surprised at all when he saw me. He lived in a three-bedroom apartment. It was very spacious for two people. It was quiet and looked neat. The living room was dark; only the bedroom on the right and the study had lights on. The door to the room in the middle was closed. I felt that his wife was in the bedroom. The Security Chief showed me to his study directly. With a Northern accent, he started the conversation by asking about my husband in Honolulu. "How is Jixiong doing in Honolulu?" he asked.

"Thanks, he is fine. He misses our daughter and me very much. He wants us to join him as soon as possible," I said. "But I need my political file in order to get a passport. I need your help. Please."

"It is not that easy," he said. I knew that if he was willing to do it, he could walk straight into the archive room without being questioned by anybody.

"Now you are my only hope. Please."

After we talked for a few more minutes, I stood up, and placed the wine and cigarettes on the desk. He reacted as if he had never accepted bribery before, and scolded me in a stern voice.

"What are you doing this for? Take them with you. I am not going to accept. You should not do such things."

I was embarrassed. I almost believed that he really did not want the wine and cigarettes. I insisted for another time that he accept the gifts and then left for the door.

Once outside the door, I took a deep breath, feeling relieved and happy that it was over. Since the Security Chief had let me go, leaving the bribery behind at his home, I knew then that my political file was on the way. As I slowly groped my way downstairs, tears welled up in my eyes. Feelings of hurt, anger, helplessness, frustration, and humiliation all came up to my heart. I felt disgusted with the Chief, the school, and myself. Was it worthwhile to sacrifice my pride and dignity in order to go to America? Wasn't it my right to have a passport and to go wherever I wanted to go? Why should the Chinese people let the government control their lives?

I waited anxiously for him to deliver the political file to me at home. But he didn't show up. Then I realized I was foolish because he would not condescend to do so, and he did not want to show that he had been bought by my bribery. So I decided to go to his office after 5 o'clock in the afternoon when everyone in the office would have left for home. I entered his office and asked him whether my file was ready. He told me to wait outside his office. In a few minutes, he came and handed me the political file saying nothing except the words "Here it is."

It has been five years since I came to America, but the memory of that dark night is still fresh. I can still feel the humiliation, the hurt to my pride, the anger and the frustration. But the nightmare is over. What matters to me now is that my family is united again here in free America and that my daughter will not have to go through my experience and can live with all human dignity.

It was not right for me to bribe the Security Chief, but I was forced to do so. If the school authority had recognized my right to get a passport, if the government did not exercise such tight control over its people, I would not have had to bribe. I am a victim of the authoritarian system. The government and the political system should be blamed.
Forget Me Not
Lori Yamanaka

In 1985, my maternal grandma started showing signs of Alzheimer's Disease. I didn’t want to acknowledge or accept the severity of her condition until the summer of 1990. That’s when I learned that the grandma that I once knew was never going to be the same. I began to think and worry about my mom and what the future held for our relationship.

In the summer of 1990, my mom decided to come to Hawai‘i, since it had been about two years since her last visit. The night that my mom was to arrive, I was so excited to see her that I went to the airport at about 6 p.m., which was an hour earlier than her flight was expected. Since I had time to kill I walked around the airport looking at the different souvenir shops and newsstands.

As I made my way to the gate, I was stopped by the sweetness smell. I looked around and realized that I had passed by a lei stand and that the fragrance was coming from the white ginger leis, which I remembered were my mom’s favorite. I decided to buy one for her.

I then continued my trek to the gate, where I waited for what felt like an eternity, but was actually only about thirty minutes before her plane finally landed. When I saw the plane at the gate, I jumped up and anxiously waited in front of the jetway doors. The doors opened and slowly people began to appear down the long corridor, but there was no sign of my mom. About three-fourths of the passengers had gotten off the plane before I caught a glimpse of my mom’s short black hair and blue rimmed glasses bobbing and weaving from behind the short Oriental man who was walking in front of her.

As I greeted her with the lei, I noticed that the petals had already started to turn brown and wilt. I guess she noticed that something was bothering me because she asked, “Why the long face? Aren’t you happy to see me?”

I told her, “Of course I am happy to see you. It’s just that the lei was so pretty when I first bought it and now look at it.”

She gave me another hug and said, “I love it because you gave it to me and it shows me how much you love me.”

We made our way to the baggage claim area, got her luggage and headed home. During the drive home from the airport to Kaimuki, we were talking nonstop trying to get each other caught up on what had been happening with ourselves and the families.

Looking back, the one question that stood out in our conversation was when my mom asked, “How is grandma?”

I answered, “Physically she is very healthy, but mentally she is getting a little bit more forgetful.”

We finally reached the house and entered through the back door. My cousin Kathy was the first person to welcome us home. My mom rushed through the kitchen and into the living room where my uncle and grandpa were watching a baseball game on television. My uncle stood up first and gave his “baby” sister a hug. Then my grandpa, who was so involved with the game, finally realized that his daughter was home and rushed over to give her a big hug and a kiss. My mom asked, “So, grandpa how are you doing?”

Grandpa replied, “I am doing fine—just a few aches and pains, but nothing major.”

Mom then asked him, “Where’s grandma?”

“Oh, grandma is in the bedroom. Let me go get her,” said grandpa.

I told them both to sit down, relax and I would go find grandma and bring her out. Grandma was in her room getting ready for bed and I told her that there was someone here that wanted to see her.

After grandma finished changing into her favorite blue and pink floral pajamas and combed her short white hair, we proceeded into the living room. As soon as we entered the room my mom stopped talking and a smile that could light up the city appeared on her face. I knew exactly how my mom felt because I felt the same way when I first saw her face as she got off the plane.

She stood up and said, “Hi Mom,” and gave her a hug, but I could tell that grandma was confused as to who this person hugging her was. As grandma pulled away from my mom, her eyebrows rose and her eyes narrowed with a look of confusion that seemed to say who are you and do I know you?

With tears building in her eyes my mom said, “Mom, it’s me, your daughter ‘Tippy’!” Grandma’s face was still a blank.

At this point everybody started in on grandma with, “Don’t you remember your daughter!? She came all the way from Sacramento to visit you.” Still there was no sign of recognition on grandma’s face.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room, and the only noise that could be heard was the sounds from the television, which seemed to grow louder with each passing moment. Nobody seemed to know what to say, so I decided that it might help grandma make a connection if she saw the old black and white portrait of my mom that sits on grandma’s vanity table. The portrait was taken when my mom was about twenty-five years old. I ran into the bedroom and got the picture. When I came back out I held the picture in front of grandma’s face and said, “Okay grandma, who is this in the picture?”

She looked at it carefully and replied, “That’s my daughter ‘Tippy.’” A sigh of
relief came over everybody in the room. Then, while holding the picture next to my mom’s face and pointing to my mom I said, "Then who is this?" Once again the blank look appeared on her face and she shrugged her shoulders and slowly said, "I don’t know."

My mom stood up and went out on to the front porch. Everybody that was left was trying to talk to grandma to make her remember, but nothing seemed to help. I decided that I better go outside and make sure that my mom was all right. As I made my way through the door I saw her sitting on the bottom step with her face buried in her hands. I stopped and a cold chill came over me, along with an array of different questions racing through my head, like how could this happen to my mom and how could my grandma forget her own daughter? The next question that popped in my head was what if that were me? Tears started to well up in my eyes.

As I hesitated to walk down the steps to where she was sitting, I realized that it was starting to drizzle, so I asked, "Mom, are you all right? Do you need a jacket or an umbrella?"

She just shook her head, and as she looked up at me it was obvious that she was crying, although it was hard to tell the tears from the raindrops. I sat down on the step behind her and put my arms around her neck. I wanted to be strong for her, but I couldn’t hold back the tears from flowing from my eyes. I said, "I’m so sorry, mom. I guess I didn’t realize how bad grandma was. I don’t understand how this could happen. I never could have imagined that she would forget you. You’re her daughter!"

In a sad and heartbroken voice, my mom replied, "I don’t understand it myself. I read about the disease in the brochures and pamphlets that the Alzheimer’s Association sent to me, but I never really believed that it would get so bad that she would forget me. And now there is nothing I can say or do that will make her remember.

Trying to cheer her up, I said, "You could never forget me, huh, mom? I am unforgettable, at least that is what you always used to tell me. I mean, with everything that I’ve put you and dad through, I think that I have made it virtually impossible for you to do."

She didn’t answer. Then in a more serious tone, "You won’t forget me, huh, mom? Promise me you won’t."

"I want to be able to promise you that and tell you that I won’t forget you or your sister and brother, but you know I can’t do that. Nobody knows what the future has in store for me," my mom replied.

As my mom’s voice faded off, a sinking feeling grew in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t like her answer, but deep down I knew that what she was saying was true.

As I squeezed her tighter, I said, "Mom, I’m really scared that one day I’m going to wake up and you won’t know who I am. I love you so much that I dread the thought that you could look at me coldly, as if I were a stranger, instead of lovingly, as your own child."

With a gentle hand to my face she said, "Baby, that’s why we have to show our love for each other while we still can. And if I should lose my memory, then you will learn to deal with the loss as I hope to, by remembering the times when both grandma and I were able to express our love for each other. In the end it will be up to me to remember that love; as it will be up to you to remember ours."

We sat on the steps for another fifteen minutes. We didn’t say a word, but just enjoyed being with each other. During this quiet time I reminisced about all the things in my life that my mom had done for me. I found a new and deeper appreciation and love for my mom that I will cherish for as long as I can. Before going back inside the house I gave my mom a big "bear hug" and a kiss and said, "I Love You, Mommy, and I always will."
I watched with anger and jealousy as all of my classmates were given a cupcake and a cup of juice. I knew the words to that infamous song. I swear I did. Every month my classmates would gather around and sing that melody. Everyone gathered around, except for me. "Tanu, how are you doing?" asked Mrs. Carvalho.

"Okay," I said.

"Do you want some juice?" she asked.

"My mom said I can't," I said hesitantly. My eyes were filled with tears and closing my eyelids served as a dam. Every second my eyelids would shut tighter only to have a few drops escape down my baby soft cheek.

"Well, you can go ahead and get your snack from your cubbyhole," she said with a smile.

Although Mrs. Carvalho seemed strict and stern, she knew my circumstances and was very empathetic. I got up quickly and grabbed my snack from my cubbyhole. As I made my way to the back of the room, my best friend Leslie smiled at me. She knew what was going on. She was my best friend.

"Mrs. Carvalho, why can't Tanu sit with us?" asked a classmate.

"He's a Jehovah's boy. That's why!" shouted another classmate.

"They don't celebrate birthdays, sweetie," said Mrs. Carvalho.

"But my mom made a cupcake for everybody," said Eric.

"Everyone is different and Tanu's family chooses not to celebrate birthdays," said Mrs. Carvalho.

Wait a minute! I wasn't different. I was a normal child like the rest of the class. I guess they thought of me as different. Oh how I wished I was in that circle eating chocolate cupcakes with snow capped tops and rainbow sprinkles. The joy and laughter they had while eating those cupcakes did not reduce my urge. Leslie was there and I wasn't.

I thought to myself, Mom won't know. Every time that evil thought (at that time it was an evil thought) entered my mind, I could hear her voice saying, "Now remember, Tanu, we don't celebrate birthdays. Those are worldly holidays and Jehovah's Witnesses don't believe in them." I had the utmost respect for my mom and I would never do anything to hurt her.

Two months later and another forbidden song echoed throughout the school halls. "We wish you a Merry Christmas, We wish you a Merry Christmas, We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year . . ." Everyone sang this melodious song, but I wasn't allowed to participate. In fact, I wasn't supposed to know the tune of this song. I wasn't supposed to know anything about Christmas. How could that be? Everyone at school was singing it, people at the malls were singing it, the television set was singing it, and the radio was singing it! Don't they get it? How could they say I wasn't supposed to know that song? Come on, people, get with the program!

Despite the religious factor, winter was my favorite time of the year. The smell of fresh-scented pine trees everywhere, little green needles creating an artificial grass surface and the sweet red and white striped candy sticks that hung from those triangle-shaped trees. The music during the Christmas season was relaxing and serene. I could not help but memorize the tunes. I wasn't allowed to have Christmas music in the house so I silently played them in my head until I went to sleep. People everywhere were much friendlier during the holiday seasons as well. They were more understanding and sympathetic. Oh, how I longed for these things, but I knew I couldn't have them.

I remember coming to school one morning and finding a branch from a Christmas tree on the ground. I looked around to see if anyone was watching me. (Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.) I quickly bent down, picked the branch up and shoved it in my pocket. I was happy yet scared. What if someone had seen me pick up the branch? I can hear it now: "Hana oko'lele, Hana oko'lele . . . You're not supposed to have that! You're a Jehovah's boy!" I don't care. I want it! I don't care I want it! I darted for the boy's restroom and anxiously pulled my Christmas out of my pocket. The sticky sap bonded with my virgin white pocket. They loved each other. They (the pine branch and my pocket, that is) were inseparable. I sniffed the pleasant pine-scented branch and smiled. It was obvious we were inseparable too! Brrring . . . brrring rang the school bell. I gave the branch one last sniff and returned it to its new home.

As I strolled into the classroom, everyone was exchanging gifts, except for me. I placed my backpack in the cubbyhole quietly so as not to disturb the rest of my classmates and I walked to my desk. Leslie came over to my desk and said, "This is for you. My mommy didn't wrap it because I told her you can't have presents."

I was so happy. My first Christmas present ever. No one had given me a present before. "Thank you, Les, but I can't give you a present," I said sadly.

"That's okay. I have enough at home," she said innocently. "Merry Christmas," she said.

For eighteen years I had to go through this same routine in and out of school. I had to explain to others why I didn't celebrate birthdays, Halloween, Thanks-
giving, Christmas, Easter, and other holidays. As I entered middle school and high school, my friends were very understanding. They did not mock me. Rather, they asked many questions about the religion. Some respected my beliefs but others didn’t.

I was not happy and my life was miserable. There were times when I would go in my room and just cry. I would cry for hours. I loved my mommy but I didn’t want to hurt her. I knew my heart was going astray and that I had chosen my destiny. I had chosen the path of destruction in my mother’s eyes, but I didn’t want to hurt her. I knew my other brother to finish the mopping and I ran upstairs to my room. I cried the whole night and refused to go to bed. I waited till my mom called. She said Dad was not doing well and that she would not be home, to get some rest and she’d have someone pick us up tomorrow.

I did not sleep the whole night and the next morning my aunt came to pick us up. When I arrived I asked my mom how Dad was. She said he was not doing “too good.” She did not tell me that they were not giving Dad blood. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not believe in blood transfusions. I overheard the doctor telling my mother that if he did not have a blood transfusion, he would die. Dad was not in the religion so why couldn’t he have blood? I asked myself. I was very upset. I began to yell at my mom and tell her to let him have the transfusion, but she did not listen to him. I cried and begged her, “Please don’t let dad die.” She said, “You’ve got to trust Jehovah and let him take care of dad, Tanu.” She told me to go outside and wait in the waiting room. I was crying so much that I could not speak clearly. I asked my aunty to take me home.

Later that night mom came home to take a shower and pick up some things from our house. The house was not the same. No one was talking and my brothers were all asleep. I refused to go to bed until mom gave me a full report on Dad’s condition. She said that he was not doing well. Just then the phone rang and mom answered it. She began to cry. She took me with her to the hospital. She did not speak to me the whole ride down, and I remember the tears rolling down her cheeks. “Mom, what’s wrong?” I asked. She did not answer. We pulled into the hospital and my aunts and uncles were waiting there. Immediately I knew what was going on. I sat in the car and began to cry. The tears were like a rapid river out of control. I could not believe it. If only mom had listened to me, Dad would have been here. He was not ready to go. I was so angry with the Jehovah’s Witnesses. I refused to speak with them. I did not even look at them. They tried to comfort me, but instead they made matters worse.

Why didn’t they listen to me? I was his child too. He did not deserve to die. He was supposed to be here. He missed his graduation speech, my scholarship banquet, and most of all he did not hear me say “I love you.” He just left. It wasn’t fair! I love you mommy, but it’s just not fair!
Ties That Bind

Gertrude Chock

Summertime in Kaimuki meant wakening to the incessant jabbering of mynah birds among the kiawe trees as they pecked at the dangling seed pods that oozed a sticky substance. Their mischievous sounds would stir my thoughts—today I’d climb high enough in our mango tree to spy on the boys who lived two doors away. I had ambivalent feelings about them; more often than not we were at odds, yet I had a curious admiration for them. Some days I was barred from their shenanigans; other days I was a bona fide partner in crime. On days when I felt really daring, over a small fire fueled by twigs, we would boil wild peas in an empty Van Camps pork and beans can, savoring each meager bite, not only because it was our own concoction, but because it was forbidden. Even if my mother did not know the extent of my activities, she was well aware of my affinity for the outdoors.

The summer that I was eight or nine years old she decided that I should spend that time in the rural town of Honouliuli with my maternal grandmother. It was there that my mother was born and raised, a small plantation town near the enormous bull. But it was the interior of the store that held the most fascination for me. The noxious smell of kerosene and other odors. My grandmother’s stock ran the gamut from kerosene to an insignificant button, and only a practiced eye could find everything. Next to a box of shoelaces, flat, round crackers with the puzzling label Saloon Pilots, nestled in oversized glass jars with screw-top lids. (With nostalgic attachment my mother also stored crackers such as these in an identical jar.) Similar jars, with knobbed lids, boasted of colorful jaw breakers, lemon drops, and other confections, on a level conveniently within my reach.

A week or two into that summer, I was shuttled to Honouliuli. Sights, sounds and smells were reliable gauges of how long the journey would take. When the acrid odor of burnt sugar cane seared my nostrils, I knew that we were more than halfway there. The charred remains of the recently harvested sugar cane lay stricken, in stark contrast to the verdant two-foot stalks that had pushed their way through the soil that nurtured them—their undulation a silent celebration of life abutting fallow fields. In the distance, smokestacks of the sugar mills stood like sentinels watching over the endless rows of sugar cane that stretched as far as the horizon. Occasionally could be heard the groan of boxcars piled with harvest, en route to the mill.

Not much later we reached the town of Waipahu where the first signs of human life appeared. Mahogany-skinned laborors, some with skinny roll-your-own cigarettes hanging from their lips, idled in front of the garish pink theater. This was their chosen haunt even when there was no movie scheduled. At about this time my cramping legs, which were conditioned for climbing trees, not taking long drives, told me that very soon we would reach my grandmother’s store.

Her store was small and nondescript, identifiable by the man-sized poster adhering to the wall that faced oncoming traffic. That poster extolled the merits of the loose tobacco known as Bull Durham, portrayed fittingly by a picture of an enormous bull. But it was the interior of the store that held the most fascination for me. The noxious smell of kerosene needed for stoves and lanterns melded with the fragrance of soap, tobacco, and candies—a potpourri of incongruent odors. My grandmother’s stock ran the gamut from kerosene to an insignificant button, and only a practiced eye could find everything. Next to a box of shoelaces, flat, round crackers with the puzzling label Saloon Pilots, nestled in oversized glass jars with screw-top lids. (With nostalgic attachment my mother also stored crackers such as these in an identical jar.) Similar jars, with knobbed lids, boasted of colorful jaw breakers, lemon drops, and other confections, on a level conveniently within my reach.

A sloping driveway next to the store led to the entrance of the yard. Several yards from the gate stood the outhouse, its presence readily signalling a dubious welcome. In the style of most plantation houses, a railed veranda ran the length of two bedrooms. A glance into one of those rooms satisfied my curiosity that the netting under which my mother had found haven from mosquitoes still veiled the bed she had slept in fifteen years ago.

A short flight of stairs led down to the partially enclosed kitchen area where my mother had shared meals with her family as I would for the rest of the summer. Looking out the back window I could see the ubiquitous sea of green stretching beyond my line of vision. Time and distance were now less of a blur; I began to understand how far I was from home.

Questions that had been captive in my mind now pushed their way to the front lines. Am I here because my mother thinks I am incorrigible? Is my sister being kept at home because she is the favored one? (I had always suspected that she was.) Will I lose the favor of the boys back home? Suddenly my longing for home could not be quelled even by the expectations of summer fun.

My cousin, who was ten days my junior, could not detect my feelings, but in his naiveté unwittingly dispelled my pangs of homesickness. Without too much forethought he quickly suggested a number of things we could do starting the next day: we could climb up to the roof of the house to pick some mangoes or maybe hike down to the train tracks and retrieve some lengths of sugar cane that might have fallen from the box cars.

Much as I missed home, I was lured by promises of adventure. Tears of homesickness mingled with anticipation on my first night away from home.

The next day, getting up to the roof meant cluding the watchful eye of my grandmother. The most efficient way to the roof required that we get a toehold on
the walls that sheltered her precious shrine. There she made daily offerings of food to her Chinese ancestors whom she summoned with the burning of pungent incense sticks. Had my mother joined her mother in the same rituals? We knew we had not escaped my grandmother's detection when we heard her words of admonition coming from below. Overjoyed that we had made it to the roof, we grabbed the succulent fruits and stripped the skins from their fleshy ripeness, ignoring the trickles of juice that snaked down our arms. After gorging ourselves, we tossed the remnants to the two pigs enclosed in pens near the far end of the house. With them we shared our satisfaction. How soon I had forgotten the anxieties of the day before.

Sometimes, in the garden that was fenced off from straying chickens, we would hunt for four-leaf clovers which supposedly would bring good luck. Would I find and treasure one as my mother once had? I would consider myself lucky if I found the elusive prize. But I did not need a four-leaf clover to bring me good luck. I had summertime.

One day we visited some distant relatives who raised watercress and children, in what order of priority I did not know. Deviating from the dusty roads, we took a shorter route through fields where honohono, a tough, weedy vine, grew rampant. The tall weeds clawed at us and tangled between our legs as if resenting our intrusion of their primal grounds. What a relief it was to plunge our feet into the icy water bubbling up from the spring that irrigated the watercress ditches. While the mother placidly nursed a baby, several children milled shyly around her skirts, embarrassed by the presence of a stranger.

By the end of summer I was no longer a stranger to country living. Sounds once unfamiliar to me, like the adenoidal snorts of the pigs as they groveled for their morning slops and the shuffle of my grandmother's footsteps as she made her way along the veranda to open shop, were now as familiar as the cacophony of mynah birds.

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English 214
Jill Makagon

**Taboo Writing**

Jackie Lee

My first writing experience began at the age of twenty four after suffering a severe head trauma that caused me to go into a coma for six months. When I came out of the coma, I had lost some of my memory and gained some ghosts that I didn't understand. These ghosts were images of people and events that did not make sense. In trying to find myself, I decided one day to sit down at the computer and write my life story, or at least what I could remember filled only five pages. This writing project was a frightening one, for I had no idea what I would learn and how it would affect my future.

As I began to type, my mind frantically raced like a computer sorting through files that consisted of only bits and pieces of incomplete information. Who was Aunt Grace? I asked myself. And why did I hide under my bunk bed afraid? Who was at the end of my bed? Why were my legs parted? How come I put the pillow over my eyes? Why was I screaming "Mommy, mommy, please don't leave me! Please take me with you!" Her reply was, "Stay with your grandfather. We will be home from dinner soon."

My insides felt so heavy. My God, did he? No, he couldn't do that! He's my grandfather. No, he wasn't, I corrected myself. He was my step-grandfather. He was a tall and regal individual whom everyone loved. At Thanksgiving dinner he used to sing jolly songs. "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice-cream." All the grandchildren used to sit on his lap and ask him to tell us wonderful stories. I remember that I really liked the story about the depression and how
people bought bones and vegetables to make soup for dinner. I also remembered him telling us that a loaf of bread cost a nickel and that my father as a young boy sold newspapers and gave all his earnings to his mother to help out the family through the hard times. What a great American family! I thought to myself. It was coming back to me who Aunt Grace was. She's my father's sister—a beautiful and graceful woman.

My mind went blank and suddenly more images were coming back. Why was I crying so hard? Why was I crying more than anyone else? I was standing on a bed of groomed green grass with bunches of flowers neatly placed all around. A priest was praying out loud. "God bless this man, for he was a kind and loving human being. He was an upstanding citizen who contributed to all of our lives. We will miss him. Amen." Everyone was smiling and so happy. Why was I crying? I asked myself. Why was he bowed at the end of my bed? Why did I put the pillow over my face? Oh God! Why did he do it? Why did he molest me? I was so young and so pure; I was so ashamed, so shy back then.

Some pleasant memories came to my fingers. One included my favorite grandmother who used to make me coffee with a lot of sugar and cream. I loved her so. I secretly wished when I was a little girl that she was my mother. She was so patient and loving. My grandmother would take me shopping, and for lunch we would go to Woolworth's and sit at the sandwich counter. During lunch we chatted about all the pretty things we had seen that day. I remembered that when we would go out, she wore just a touch of make-up and her silver hair was neatly combed in loose curls. Her hands were long and thin, and her nails were always beautifully manicured and polished. I remembered why I liked oil baths and perfumes; it was because of my grandmother's influence. She always told me to be pretty. As I sat and stared blankly into the computer screen, I thought to myself, I don't think she was referring to my appearance.

As I continued to type, another memory came back to me. It was high school, and my first boyfriend. I couldn't remember his name, but I remembered that one day we skipped school and went to the park. He was kissing me and holding me. I couldn't remember if I loved him. The next thought came to mind. I was back at school and on my way to class where I stopped to use the bathroom and noticed my underwear was stained with blood. I ran to class and was so worried that someone would smell me and know I had had sex. I was so ashamed, so shy back then.

After I finished writing as much as I could remember about my life, I printed it out and read it with tears in my eyes. There were so many gaps, and so many painful unanswered questions. The purpose of writing was to find myself and I hoped that piecing memories together would help to define who I was and where I came from. I stared at the pages filled with words and incomplete sentences for endless hours, but came up with very little. I laid the pages down.

Time has passed and what I have learned is that the act of writing can be very hard and painful. When writing about oneself, there are emotions attached. Such emotions can cause severe emotional and physical pain. When I put my life down on paper many years ago, I did not have the foresight to see that I would eventually look back and appreciate the courage I had to endure such pain. This courage pushed me forward and I no longer fear writing.

looked up with tears in his eyes. I told him, "I think I know what has been bothering me. I think I have it." I told him that my grandfather could not have penetrated me because my underwear was soiled with blood after having sex with my high school boyfriend.

"Isn't that great?" I screamed.

"Well, yes." He also looked at me with a perplexed look on his face, and asked, "Why the sudden change of mood? Why is your face down? I thought you were happy."

I explained I was glad my step-grandfather did not penetrate me, but I think he did molest me.

He's dead now. How do I confront him? Do I have to stew in this till I die? Why did I remember this? Is this who I am?

One day I picked them up again and reread what I had written. Something was bothering me. What was it? I thought to myself. Yes! I grabbed my paper and ran to the phone. I called my husband and asked him to come home quickly. When he arrived, I asked him to read what I had written. After he finished reading it, he
A Soul in a Carapace
Dianna Payne

The sea turtle is an enigma. Who knows what he thinks? Cresting and submerging about the ocean currents, he gracefully feeds on jellyfish, seaweed, and what floats along to tempt a nibble. I wonder. Is he more than disturbed in his underwater flight at the sight of a circling shark? Does he taste the metallic sweetness of fear in his mouth as he races to sanctuary beyond a coral reef? Once safe, does he contemplate his good fortune? Is a turtle, or any animal for that matter, confined to the reasoning his instinct allows, or does he consider his day at the end of the day and debate other possible fates? I have no idea what a turtle thinks about, yet I reckon great emotion lies beneath the carapace.

Joy for example. As one lays her eggs at the exact spot of her own hatching, as so often is the turtle's way, is she heartened by a sense of homecoming? Is she grateful that her offspring will begin their lives at the very place of her emergence?

You realize, I'm sure, that we often project our own sensibilities and attributes upon animals. But to spy a male turtle sunning under a clear tropical sky, watching the day pass winsomely with a Mona Lisa smile across his benevolent face, his reptilian disguise thins, exposing a humble intelligence. Yet, he speaks nothing of his thoughts. He will hiss if threatened; otherwise he lives his generous years out in silence. Speechless.

Lois-Ann Yamanaka, author of Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre, writes, in a poem entitled "Turtles," how these wonderful creatures who live in the seas and on the shores of Hawai'i can touch your heart. As I understand, the speaker grew up under the influence of a surrogate father named Bernie who owned a taxidermy shop. Bernie once told her a story about how, "When you catch a turtle, the turtle he cry a tear from his big, wet eye." Well, this affected the young Ms. Yamanaka who was sympathetic to turtles and all life in general, as young girls are often predisposed to be. One day they went to watch some turtle eggs hatch (a very rare sight), and this is how she tells the tale:

The little turtle babies, they pop their head right out the black sand. They all black too. And when one 'nother one about to come up, the sand cave in little bit around the turtle head. Turtles, they know by instinct where is the ocean, Bernie tell. Watch. And he turn one baby turtle backwards to the mountain. Then the turtle he turn his own self around and run to the water.

Get plenny. They all running to the water. They shine when the wave hit them. And their heads stay bob up and down in the ocean. Plenny little heads. Bernie pick one up and give um to me. Like take um home? Take um, take um, he tell me. I think about the turtles on Bernie wall. They look like they crying too. Nah, I tell him. I no like um. I take the baby turtle to the water edge, his eye all glassy, his whole body shine, and I put um down. No cry now, I tell um, No cry.

Like Ms. Yamanaka's narrator, I learned a little something about turtles by looking into their "Big, wet eyes," too. It had been a frustrating, lonely day. I had recently ended a long, ill-fated love affair and was in a palpable blue funk. So, just as some people are drawn to tear-inducing love stories, I force myself to dwell on my sadness until it grows into a terrific cloud over me, casting a shadow on the landscape of my heart. I will stubbornly bathe under the torrential cloud until I feel I have been properly cleansed.

In this state, disenchanted with life and wallowing in self-pity, I made my way along the coastline, looking for a private beach where I could cry in front of no one but the sea. Driving along the Kalaniana'ole Highway, nearing Waimanalo, I came upon a deserted spot to the side of the road and pulled my old, battered Pinto onto the sandy cleft to investigate. At first glance, I knew it was perfect. With a turn of the key, I extinguished the rasp and rattle of the car's engine and opened the door.

The sky was a blanket of brushed, white cotton sweeping down to meet a placid sea at the horizon. The water, a tranquil bed of turquoise and emerald, lapped lazily at the clean, powdery sand. I left my slippers in the car so I could feel that cool, soft sand between my toes as I plopped down, lit a Marlboro, and succumbed wholeheartedly to my melancholy.

As the first rush of tears subsided, I took some time to breathe in the fine, clean air of a pristine sea. Filling my lungs in a deep breath, I looked out over the water and to the horizon. No ships were out, nothing to obscure my view of God. As my eyes trailed back, closer to shore I caught a flash of movement in the water. It seemed I had company.

I watched in anticipation for any motion on the coral-carpeted floor of the bejeweled water. And there, less than three feet out, bobbed the heads of three
turtles. An irrepressible smile slashed across my face as warm, leftover tears tickled their way down my perched cheeks nearly unnoticed. The turtles were looking right at me. Their great, black eyes locked in on me. Occasionally, one would dip his head into the water, then come right back up to lock his gaze back on me. All three were about the same size, not large, but definitely mature. They were a perfect complement to the water in color, a green found nowhere in a Crayon box. They made little disturbance in the water as they floated on the surface, watching me watching them. I saw their fins dangling beneath them, swishing against the calm swells to keep in place. I was mesmerized. Why were they watching me so intently? What were they thinking?

In my self-consumed depression, I considered that they’d intuited my grief and had come in benevolence to cheer me up. An irrational explanation, I know, but there was a magical, ancient quality about their appearance before me, like coming upon a grazing unicorn in a field of lilies and sweet grass in a dream, hinting at some unsuspected destiny. I had wanted to sob and moan and wallow in my misery, but these precious, grinning faces wouldn’t leave me alone. They had bewitched me, turning my sadness into nothing more than a pesky fly to be flicked off my shoulder. They floated and watched. Slowly, I came to think that maybe they were just curious.

Perhaps they were mildly amused. Self-consciously, I took inventory of myself. There I sat in my torn Levi’s and T-shirt, bare toes buried in the sand, a cigarette dangling from my chapped lips, with swollen eyes and stained cheeks. I thought of why I’d come. I thought of why I’d been driven to such self-flagellation.

A giggle shook my chest, bubbled its way past my larynx and fell across my lips like an easy song to sing. I looked out at the turtles, floating in the water. “I got it,” I said aloud. I don’t know exactly what it was they had taught me, but it was clear that my heart understood. The cloud I had summoned to cover me had parted. The sun shone on my face.

Some time later, I rose from my spot. My guardians held their posts as I made my way back to the car. Brushing sand from the seat of my pants as I walked, I basked in the peaceful quality of my audience with the turtles and opened my car door. With a final look back, I saw that they were gone. While pushing the key into the ignition, a sense of gratitude came over me. No longer did my audience with the turtles seem surreal. It seemed, simply, as if I’d spent some good time with a friend who really knew how to listen and let me figure things out for myself. I turned the key, the Pinto choked and cussed back to life, and I headed down the road towards home. As I was driving along, a fact popped into my head. It was something I’d either read in an encyclopedia or seen on the Discovery Channel. Did you know that all turtles, be they sea or land dwellers, bury their eggs? Cocking my head to one side, the possibility struck me with hilarity and a belly-laugh shook me in my seat. Do you think, maybe, the turtles were watching me so intently because I was sitting on their eggs?