

A Small Obligation *and other stories of Hilo*



by Susan Nunes

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For Mother and Dad

CONTENTS

<i>Title Page</i>	iii
<i>Dedication</i>	vii
<i>Preface: The Ebesu Girls</i>	ix
<i>The Immigrant</i>	1
<i>Maria das Vacas</i>	5
<i>The Belt</i>	9
<i>Hilo Story</i>	10
<i>The New Year</i>	11
<i>The Yardman</i>	13
<i>The Grandmother</i>	17
<i>Fathers</i>	21
<i>The Confession</i>	22
<i>Winterpear 1951</i>	28
<i>Sisters</i>	31
<i>Mais Fica</i>	32
<i>Morning</i>	34
<i>Puumaile</i>	39
<i>Note</i>	42
<i>Saturday Night</i>	43
<i>Rosie's Buttons</i>	45
<i>My Mother's Tree</i>	46
<i>...and Mud Lane shall be known as Piopio</i>	54
<i>The Ministers</i>	57
<i>Persimmons</i>	63
<i>A Small Obligation</i>	64
<i>Obituary</i>	73
<i>Copyright</i>	4

Preface: The Ebesu Girls

To us they were always “the Ebesu girls.” The eldest, Tsuyako, is of my mother’s generation, but they are still “the Ebesu girls.” No one is more generous. And Hilo is a town of generous people.

A few years ago, my two sisters and I made a brief trip to Hilo. We visited the Ebesu Store with a small gift. The gift was really a token—and it’s important that you see this—because the Ebesu girls were so good to my family and a mere gift would never cover all they have done for us over the years.

We walked through the delivery entrance with a box of mochi and careful, explicit instructions from our uncle to say hello, leave the gift, and walk out, quickly, before we were inundated with things to take back to Honolulu. “If you stay,” Taka had said, “they’ll start packing a box.”

“Hello,” we said to the first sister, who was seated at a large table cutting flowers. The store smelled the same. It had not changed. She looked up over her glasses. “*Hello*,” she said, recognizing us, then called into the depths of the shop, “Look who’s here. Shiho’s daughters.” Two more heads appeared, and one of them said, “Come in, come in and say hello.”

We walked into where the glass chiller stood filled with orchids, roses and carnations, just as it used to be when we were children and would press our noses against the cold glass. I never left that store empty-handed.

A fourth appeared. “How is Grandma?” She was fine, I said, still holding the box of mochi and beginning to regret being the eldest, the one to present the gift. Such a small one. “And your mother?” asked another, without waiting for our answer continued, “Look at Lizabeth. No it’s Sara! My, you do look like your father.” Sara smiled and Liz was grinning.

Finally I managed, “Here. This is just a little something from the three of us and we really have to go now.” All in one breath, just as I had been instructed.

“Why do you have to go? Are you on the way to the airport?” We nodded the lie. It was only a little one. “Wait a few minutes, please, girls,” Kiyochan insisted. “You can wait and we’ll pack you a box of vegetables.”

We shook our heads vigorously. “Oh no. We really have to go.”

Preface: The Ebesu Girls

“What time are you leaving?” asked Nobuchan suspiciously. Liz mumbled something in reply, and Sachi said, “Well, then. We’ll pack you a box. For Grandma.”

“We can’t stay,” I managed, “Taka’s in the car.”

“Taka?” one asked. “Why didn’t he come in?”

“He’s afraid to,” we laughed. “He said we were to say hello and run or you would start packing a box of vegetables. See? He was right.”

“Oh, that boy!” Taka, you understand, is in his forties.

Taking advantage of the joke, we turned to go. “Next time,” we said, “next time.” More laughter followed us as we backed out of the store with one of the Ebesu girls in pursuit, protesting and calling and laughing. Like bells. Just like bells. “Well,” we said to Taka, “we made it.” He didn’t seem impressed.

When we got back to Taka’s house to pick up our luggage, Aunty Cecelia met us at the door. At her feet were two flower boxes tied with white string and one large carton of vegetables, taped and tied with brown cord. “Nunes” was written on all three. “It came five minutes ago,” said Cecelia, “I told you so.” But we were laughing so hard we hardly heard her. And tears were running down Sara’s face.

The Immigrant

August and September are hot, still months, but by late October the waters off the rocky southeast coast turn a shade bluer and colder. When November comes only the pole fishermen, silent waiting figures, soften the desolation of black lava rock and lauhala grove. Many people head for the mountains, driving the rough saddle road between the two great peaks to picnic in pheasant country. Fall comes subtly to this island, and only those who make a habit of seeing change notice the signs. But in November the fishermen are still there, standing on the black rock, white water at their feet, long bamboo poles pulled seaward into that blue.

Albert Tanimura was born in the late summer of 1931. His father, Sada, was fishing that day, and Mr. Higuchi next door had to search the Puna coast road to tell him the time was near.

Ima Tanimura lay in her bed, the midwife attending, bony hands massaging belly and thighs under the blanket. When Ima was too tired to cry out, when the room had become an orange blur through the sweat in her eyes, she felt the last pain, then a rush like warm water. It had been a difficult birth, she would say later, her breasts heavy with milk and her son's head buried in the folds of her kimono, but he was a child of fortune, a gift, because he had come so late in their lives. The angry red birthmark would fade in time.

Sada and Ima had waited fifteen years for a child. It was not easy for Ima to live with her mother-in-law's silent accusation. The unfairness would sting, but she was a good daughter to the old woman. When barely out of her teens, Ima had crossed the ocean to the island, married the serious-faced man whose image she had never seen until the betrothal was arranged and the go-between had shown her the photograph. In the years that followed her marriage she often felt cut off, adrift, but with the birth of her son the threads of the past had truly caught somewhere. She had created something against flux and uncertainty. She had survived.

When Albert was four years old, Sada's widowed mother announced that she would return to Japan. This was not unusual, for many of the old ones went back to their villages to retrieve the thing they believed they had lost. Ima had sat qui-

etly, fighting to control the elation she felt at the news. She kept her eyes on her son playing beside her. She glanced at her husband's back, then at her mother-in-law's parched and tired face. The old woman's hair, dyed jet-black and pulled severely back into a matron's bun, seemed suddenly incongruous. Why hadn't she noticed these things before? A wave of remorse washed over her.

Sada's back betrayed nothing; he acknowledged his mother's wishes with a profound bow. Most of the family property would be sold, but the Tanimura store in Kapoho was left to him. Ima listened, eyes lowered, fingers toying absently with her son's hair. So this was change, she thought, but change that reaffirmed a tradition, that strengthened those slender connecting threads with the past. Maybe now she could look to a future in which she would not be a stranger.

In time Ima would see her expectations fulfilled. Sada never changed, and although the three lines where his brows pulled together deepened, and the creases running from his nose to the corners of his straight mouth became fixed as lines carved in stone, they seemed signs of a promise kept. The skin over his eyes pulled down at the corners, masklike, changeless, and her reassurance grew. But sometimes she was left to wonder at an old Japanese paradox of no change where change was visible.

Sada became a quiet, solitary man. It was Ima who laughed and talked with the customers, who dispensed information and pleasantries along with the fishing tackle and canned goods. And it was Ima who ran the store, who did the ordering and cataloguing, who, with only occasional help from her husband, kept the accounts, who could look through the clutter and know precisely what would be needed by the next week.

"Tanimura-san, Tanimura-san!" she heard many times every day. And she would answer, not Sada.

Sada took up fishing. What was once a pastime grew into an avocation. Yet if Sada appeared to lack the business acumen of his wife, if he seemed more reserved than most, these very aspects of his nature earned him the regard of the Japanese community. Indeed, his mother had raised him well. When customers asked after him, Ima, hiding her pride, would point to the small room behind the store where Sada read the silkbound books from Japan. It must have been reassuring to have a scholar fisherman, someone who reminded them all of what they had left in another place.

Ima loved her son as part of herself. He was an affectionate child, properly dependent, respectful, obedient. When he entered boyhood she noted with pleasure the bond between father and son. The physical resemblance was strong. More than that, though, was a closeness of minds, an intimacy of two people with like natures. However, she became aware of an extraordinary difference between the two, something that she could not see. It seemed to lie within herself, in her response to each of them. Where she had felt a surge of reassurance when she looked at the face of her husband, she began to feel a vague but persistent sense

of alarm when she looked at her son. It was not the birthmark; that had faded long before.

Ima never mentioned these things to Sada. Never. For then she would have to explain all those other things, thoughts that went back to the day she had left her village in Japan. How could she explain that her life had held no promise until the birth of her son, no belonging until Sada's mother had left them the store? Sada would be embarrassed.

And anyway, she reassured herself, during the week Sada hardly looked at the boy. Ima assumed the larger share in his upbringing, just as she did with the store. It wasn't until Sunday that they went fishing.

The weekly trips to the coast were established by Albert's seventh birthday. Sada and the boy would rise before dawn, prepare their lunch, wrap shrimp bait in newspaper, tie bamboo poles to the side of the truck, and drive off into the early morning.

However, in the late autumn and winter months, Sada fished alone. Ima dreaded those days. She could almost hear the white water lunging with fury against the shore, then pulling, pulling ever seaward. She would watch her son's face and the dark look that lingered until Sada returned wet from the sea. And something between the quiet acquiescence and longing on that young face echoed somewhere within herself.

That is what gave the Sunday in November such significance.

Sada and Ima rose together as usual. It was dark outside, and the light from the bare electric bulb cast their bedroom in orange. The air was heavy, smelling of rain. Sada left the room wearing denim trousers, woolen shirt, and rubber jacket. Ima could hear him calling Albert. She turned off the light and dressed in the dark.

The family took their meal in the room behind the store. The wind had started up, and Albert cast anxious looks at his father. Finally Sada lay down his chopsticks and said he would fish alone that day. Ima watched her son's face but could read nothing there. His head was bent over his empty bowl.

She prepared Sada's lunch while the boy wrapped the shrimp and checked the tackle. He did all this silently. When Sada finished loading the truck and came back into the store the boy began to cry.

"Please let me go with you," he pleaded. "Please take me," he said again when his father did not reply.

Sada looked at his son, then at his wife. His face had not changed, but Ima felt his discomfort with the tears.

"No," he said, "Not today." He turned to go, paused as if to say something more, then left them.

When the sound of the truck faded away, Ima turned to chide her son. "Albert. What is the matter with you?" she began, "Have you no respect?" With this he raised his face and looked at her. Then through her. Ima was moved to silence.

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo

His expression, so strange, yet so familiar, made something in her snap, and she thought she heard the sound of the sea. In a few moments it was gone and there was only the wind outside.

They never found Sada Tanimura's body. The events of December, 1941 made it impossible to pursue the search. He was mourned quietly. In 1960 the town of Kapoho was covered by a lava flow. Everything was destroyed, including the Tanimura Store. Ima moved to Hilo to live with her son.

Albert looks very much like his father, but he is losing his hair. He enjoys fishing, he tells his friends, but there is never enough time. Ima's two grandchildren are a source of much pleasure. However, she has difficulty understanding them. They do not speak Japanese.

Maria das Vacas

"You're old, Maria," she said to herself. It was early morning and she was taking her cows to pasture. She stepped off the railroad tracks, lifting her full skirts. The road was deeply rutted and her boots sank ankle deep into the mud. "Maria," she swore. Then she heard the whistle ending the night shift and looked to her right. Across the pond the mill droned steadily; a sugar barge chugged slowly down the Waialoa River to the harbor.

"Eh, Maria!" someone called. Maria recognized one of the assistant mechanics. "How's your cows, Maria?" he asked.

"You should know," she answered. The man laughed and slapped his thigh. Maria thought to herself, he laughs at me, but he will never be more than an assistant, not as long as there's a haole willing to work in the mill. He'll die in a plantation house.

"How are your children?" she asked politely. She liked his children, especially the oldest boy. She could always get a smile out of him.

"They're well. The oldest he goes to St. Mary's."

"He doesn't get the milk no more," said Maria. "Is that your youngest you send now? I think she's afraid of me."

The man laughed again and waved. Maria turned to her cows. She slapped the rump of the last one, and the flies rose and settled.

Maria followed her cows up the winding lane to the pastures in upper Kukuau. Sections of old ohia forest had been cleared years before, and the open spaces were covered with bracken and California grass. This morning the air was still and humid; nothing moved except the white cabbage butterflies rising and falling over the high grass. Maria came out of the sunlight and into a grove of guava and Java plum trees. Ahead on the right was the dairy, a rectangular building built of lava rock and coral and set off from the lane by an ohia fence.

At one time Maria's father had owned most of the land in the area. He had cleared the forest above the dairy when she was a child, grazing his cows where the feedshed now stood. Now she kept her few cows on a small piece of property near the mill and walked them to pasture every morning after milking.

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo

Her father had been a tall, angular man, quick-tempered but kind. Maria had inherited his coarse black hair and light eyes. He had a reputation for both strength and stubbornness. Once, in Madeira, he had almost killed an ox when the animal refused to be broken to the plow. Her father had given her the name Maria das Vacas. Maria of the Cows. She didn't mind; it had been his salutation.

Years before he had teased her as they sat in the clearing eating their midday meal. "You smell like milk," he said. Hurt, she had snapped back, "And you? You think you smell so good?" He threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Like the cows," he said. He took a bite of bread and wiped his face with his blue handkerchief. "You know, one day I won't have my Maria das Vacas to bring my meals."

"What do you mean?" she had said. "I'll always do that."

"No. A daughter always leaves."

"Leaves? And who's going to milk the cows? You? You don't have time, and that fool you hired is good for nothing."

"Joseph? He's all right. Eh, I thought you liked him. I've seen you watching. Don't lie."

"You know what he told me? He wants to go to California. California! And for what? To see a few relatives. To travel, he says." She shook her head. "That man is a dreamer."

"Nah," her father said, "he's just young." He took out a bag of tobacco and rolled himself a cigarette. "So, you've been talking, eh Maria?"

Maria turned so he couldn't see her face. "It's hot. I better go." She began to gather the remains of their meal.

"Wait,"—her father's face was serious. He looked the same way when he blessed the bread in the mornings. "You'll marry, Maria, and you'll have fine sons." He touched one of her heavy black braids. "Sometimes you're like your mother. Proud and stubborn. Before we came here she used to bring me my meals in the field. Like you do. Bread, oranges, oil, all in a big basket. I'd hear her call 'Joseph!' and I'd stop my work to watch her come over the hill. It was one of my greatest pleasures." He looked toward the harbor and the sea. "She was never happy here." He crossed himself, then flashed Maria a teasing smile, the memory forgotten.

"What?" Maria said.

"What, what," he mimicked playfully. "Be good to that young man. Or you'll get a beating, eh? He'll own property one day. A dreamer is not a bad thing."

"Like you?"

"Yes, like me."

As Maria passed the dairy, a man followed by two boys came out of the stone building. "Good morning," he called. Maria nodded a greeting and walked over to the fence.

She reached into her apron for a bag of tobacco. "How's business?" she asked.

"Same thing."

"Who's the boy?" Maria indicated the younger of the two children.

"Joseph's son." He called him. "Eh Frank, say hello to Maria das Vacas."

The boy took refuge behind his cousin. Maria noticed his fair skin, the slight build. "He's small for his age."

"Like his mother," the man said.

"What do you hear from Joseph?" she asked.

"He's fine. Going to be a father again."

"Again? What's that, seven?"

"Six. She lost the last one. This one, the oldest, takes the train from Hakalau. He'll stay with us for a month to help."

Maria calculated a moment. What did that make the boy? Eleven? Twelve? The years had gone quickly since Joseph had traveled to California and met the eighteen-year-old daughter of a distant relative. He had been twenty-eight years old and, instantly smitten, had proposed marriage a week after he arrived. She surprised him by accepting, and they were married a month later, shortly before he was due to return to the islands.

When he brought her home, he had driven her through the streets of Hilo in an open carriage. He was so proud. Maria heard he was back and was on her way to his parents' house when she met the carriage. "Joseph!" she cried, so happy to see him that for a moment she didn't notice that he was not alone. The woman wore a wide sunhat and a long veil covered her face. Her dress was white with pale violet flowers embroidered on the huge flared sleeves and around the high lace collar.

"May I present Eleanora," he said proudly, "my wife." The woman lifted her veil and smiled hesitantly. "Eleanora, this is Maria. Her father owns the dairy I told you about." The woman reached down with one small gloved hand. Automatically Maria extended hers, but then she saw how dirty it was and thrust it in the folds of her skirt.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

Joseph lifted the reins. "Tell your father I'll call on him soon," he said. The woman smiled again and lowered the veil. The carriage drove off.

Later, her father found her in the pasture. "I was worried," he said. "I should have known you'd be here."

"I'm sorry," Maria said.

"I saw Joseph"—he paused—"and his bride. Are you all right?"

"Of course," she said tightly.

"No one knew, Maria," he said. He put his large hand on her shoulder. "He never knew your feelings, eh Maria?"

"No. Thank God. I don't think it would have made a difference."

“You don’t know. But there will be others, my Maria das Vacas. Forget this one.”

“No!” she whispered. “There will be no others!”

Her father had not argued. But he had looked so tired and resigned that she had added, “I am your Maria das Vacas. I have your name, and together we have all this”—she pointed about her—“What more could I want, eh?”

“He’s growing deaf, my brother,” said the man. “It’s the noise in the mill. He talks about moving to Hilo when he retires. I tell him, you’re too young to talk of retiring.”

“You never know,” said Maria. She looked around her. “Once I thought all this would be mine.” She laughed, showing her tobacco-stained teeth. “*But,*” she said, “I have my house and my cows. See how they’re waiting? Well, I’m going. A good day to you.” She ground out her cigarette and called to her cows.

The two boys ran along the fence for awhile. “Goodbye Maria,” they shouted, “Goodbye Maria das Vacas.”

The Belt

It was made of five strips of leather woven in a crosshatch pattern. Eight inches from the end the strips hung loose, like a whip. Being the eldest he was most frequently the recipient of his father's command "Go get the belt." When he was twelve he decided he would never get the belt again. He made the decision riding the train into Hilo to school, his buttocks aching from the whipping he'd received for not mowing the churchyard and for fighting with his brother (who was supposed to have helped him but who had gone swimming instead). That afternoon he lifted the belt from its hook on his parents' bedroom door, walked out of the house, trotted down the road away from the camp, and flung the belt into Aikini Gulch.

Hilo Story

She was Japanese and he was Portuguese and they were introduced on the tennis court next to the fire station by the town mortician. Everyone said wasn't that funny. They didn't know that he had waited to meet her for three years ever since the day he saw her at the beach under a parasol. She was so fair. ("One pound powder," her friends called her.) They were married in March of 1941, nine months before Pearl Harbor. (Her mother took to bed the week before; her parents did not attend the wedding.) She wore a navy blue dress with a white collar. He wore a business suit. They're not smiling in their wedding photograph.

The New Year

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Aka, what’s that noise?”

Mrs. Tanaka paused a moment to listen, then wiped her forehead with the back of her soapy hand. “That’s the Mochi Man, Amy-chan.” She picked up the wash brush and continued scrubbing.

“But Aka. What are they doing?”

“They’re pounding the rice,” replied the woman without ceasing the rhythmic movement of her right hand.

“Oh,” came the soft reply from across the wash basin.

“Go and find Aha,” said Mrs. Tanaka. “Maybe he’ll take you to the Mochi Man’s house.”

When Mrs. Tanaka looked up the child had disappeared.

* * * *

Hanako was stirring a large kettle of boiling starch for her mother when the kitchen door slammed.

“Ako, where’s Aha? I can’t find him. Aka said he’d take me to see the Mochi Man.”

Hanako looked at the little face, so insistent for its four years. “Aha’s at the store. He’s coming home soon. Sit here and wait.”

“But—”

“And don’t worry. Plenty time.”

They heard Mr. Tanaka coming up the path and the child was at the door to meet him.

“Aha! Take me to see the Mochi Man. Please, Aha!”

“Ah ha ha ha!” boomed Mr. Tanaka. “Okay. Okay. I take.” He looked down at her feet. “Oh? No more slipper? No more slipper no can go.”

“Ako. Ako, where are my slippers?”

“On the porch.”

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo

* * * *

Amy clattered into the kitchen, slippers on.

“Ai-ya,” said the old man, bending down in front of her. “Look. Wrong side.”

“Can we go now, Aha?”

“Okay. Okay. Ah ha ha ha!” Laughing, he took her hand and they walked out the kitchen door.

The Yardman

He came to Hilo in the late twenties shortly after the street names were changed. There is a photograph that shows him in coveralls and a wide-brimmed straw hat. The hat casts a shadow over his face so that his features are not clearly defined. In one hand he holds a small fishing net for catching river fish; in the other he holds a bucket. Standing next to him is a child with pale braids who comes up to his shoulders. She is wearing boots with the trousers stuffed into them and a jacket with two rows of bright metal buttons. She too is holding something in her hands, but it's not clear what it is. There is not much else in the picture, except the Waiakea Pond. On the back of the photograph are the words "Amy with Mr. Naito, Piopio, September 1948."

For twenty years he lived in the basement of the Kinoshita house in the narrow dirt lane off Piopio Street, until the damp became one more thing equated with himself, a reminder of old age noticed only after it had been there a long time. When the house was first built, Piopio was called Mud Lane. Its history, however, was erased with the changing of street names. Mr. Naito knew nothing of statutes. Piopio echoed upon an inner ear a simple clear note, like the cry of a bird heard from a great distance. He would have chuckled at the local expression, "pio." Gone. Ended. The house sat with its back to the pond on a small rise of land behind the Japanese language school. It was built in the late 20's, square and white with a green corrugated iron roof, a modest version of the big homes in Puueo and Reed's Bay. The main floor rested nearly a full story off the ground over a slatted, partially enclosed basement. Double-hung windows were screened to keep out mosquitoes. A wide porch and handsome white railing gave the house a quiet respectability.

* * * * *

On the porch was a table, and seated around it were four women, large wooden embroidery frames resting on their laps. At this early hour the porch was cool and pleasant, but soon the morning sun would flood it with light, and Mrs.

Kinoshita would have to hold her sewing class inside. Deft fingers pushed and pulled needles and bright colored thread through taut fabric. Sumi, the youngest, broke the rhythm of steel and silk.

“Kinoshita-sensei, how is your granddaughter?”

“Amy-chan?” asked the small, round woman with the matron’s bun. “She is at Harue’s school.”

Ripples of surprise rose and settled. Mrs. Kinoshita cleared her throat and continued. “Miho thought she should have more supervision. We are so busy, you know, Mr. Kinoshita and I.” The group hummed their acknowledgment to the beat of their work. Yes. Yes. Busy. Busy. Mrs. Kinoshita cleared her throat again, her eyes still on the cloth in front of her. “And poor Mr. Naito could not get his work done. She would follow him and follow him. Mr. Naito fix this. Go get rock candy. Go Waiakea fish market. Go feed ducks.” Mrs. Kinoshita snipped the thread and reached for another strand. “Such an affectionate child. But difficult, you know. Muzukashii.”

The group waited. Mrs. Kinoshita shook her head and made clucking sounds with her tongue. Her parchment eyelids flickered like the lids of a gecko. “Her mother was never willful. One wonders where it comes from.” It was not a question anyone was expected to answer, but Sumi, youngest and least tried of the group, did not know the rules.

“But her father is such a lovely man,” she protested. “So kind.”

Mrs. Kinoshita studied the work of the woman to her right. “Kazue, you will need more silver for the wing. Number 200, I think.”

Just then Mr. Naito walked across the front yard toward the vegetable garden. Passing the porch, he bowed.

“Good morning, Kinoshita-sensei.”

“Good morning, Mr. Naito.”

* * * * *

Beyond Mr. Naito’s well-tended vegetable garden and the greenhouse for anthuriums and orchids, the ground sloped toward the edge of the property, leveling out in a dense thicket. Guava. Thimbleberry. Honohono grass. The old man broke a heart-shaped leaf from one of the dry-land taro plants and walked down the slope. Great clouds of mosquitoes rose about him when he entered the thicket. He moved systematically through the bushes, ignoring the thorns that pulled at his overalls. After a few minutes he had what he wanted.

He missed Amy and couldn’t understand what had provoked her parents. Something had happened the week before. The child had perched at his doorway like a little bird and would not come in. “How come I’m only half Japanese?” she had asked. He had not known what to say, so he asked, “How come you asking?” But she couldn’t explain. Later he learned she had been punished for something.

The Yardman

Whatever it was she had done had caused the question to rise like a fish to the surface of a pond. When he felt it was appropriate to ask after the child, Mrs. Kinoshita had apologized for the way Amy kept him from his work. Strange.

He felt the pinprick of a mosquito on his cheek and rubbed it with his sleeve. Walking back to the house, he felt the sun hot on his neck, but the small green bundle in his hand still had the coolness of shade.

“Kinoshita-sensei,” he said, climbing the porch stairs. “For your granddaughter.”

The woman put down her needle and took the gift. “I will put it in the icebox.” She looked at him as if considering an afterthought. “Thank you, Mr. Naito.”

The pleasant sound of needles pulled through taut silk continued, and Sumi murmured, “Such a thoughtful man.” Moments later the old man bent into the shed, and the morning sun touched the porch railing.

* * * * *

When the sun was high, Mr. Naito walked down Piopio Street toward the restaurant parking lot on the Kilauea side of the pond. He looked small and frail, the weight of his clothes appearing almost too much for him. A black wool jacket brushed the back of his thighs and its front dipped down to his knees. He had ironed the white cotton shirt himself; he wore it with a dark brown tie that hung well below the waist of his baggy trousers. Yet in spite of the ill fitting clothes, there was something dignified about him.

The pond was still, except at the water's edge where a few ducks swam among the water lilies. Mr. Naito took some bread from a paper bag and threw it piece by piece into the water. The ducks bobbed and splashed, disturbing the placid surface of the pond. He watched the ripples cross the water to where the abandoned canec mill stood. So quiet. Before Amy was born the mill had droned day and night. He removed his hat, wiped his forehead with a blue handkerchief, then took off his jacket. His trousers were belted and also held up by a pair of ancient suspenders. When he shook from the bag the last of the crumbs, he heard the cry—a simple, clear note. His eyes searched the water for the bird, but the sun was too bright.

Across the pond Mrs. Kinoshita would be getting ready for her afternoon class. The porch, flooded with light, would force the women into the cool front room. Mr. Naito turned towards the street to walk the two miles to the Daijingu Shrine.

* * * * *

While his rice cooked on the open fire he sat at his doorstep peeling scallions.

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo

It was quiet labor and fitting at the day's end. Fresh scallions lay on a sheet of newspaper. He finished peeling the outer layers, neatly trimming and exposing the shiny white hearts, and placed each piece in a pan of water. He paused for a moment and watched the long shadows of the late afternoon and felt the first chill of evening. He looked over at the fire. The coals glowed back.

Then he heard her. She came to his side, and he tried not to look at her eyes, bright against the olive skin. Yes, there was something. He waited, offering her some dried fish.

"Mama said we're moving house," she said suddenly.

"Sō?"

"Did you feed the ducks today?" she asked.

"Hai."

"I miss the ducks." She regarded him closely for a moment or two. Then she picked at the discarded bits of onion skin, chose one, and held it up to the sky.

Finally he asked, "Have you eaten your berries?"

"Berries?" Then suddenly she was gone, pale braids and red jacket in a flutter, calling "Obāchan! Obāchan!"

* * * * *

Night. He could not sleep. The room was damp and cold. The pond. The damp. This would never do, he thought, this would never do. He lay listening. Waiting. Then he threw off the cotton quilt and reached for the long cord of the ceiling switch. The light from the bare bulb hurt his eyes, so he turned it off and stood patiently for a few moments. When he could see the outlines of the window, he tightened the sash of his kimono and moved toward the door.

Outside it was warmer and he was aware of a faint breeze moving the hair on his head. He closed the door of his room, put on his slippers, and walked out into the yard.

He stood looking across the water. Between himself and the pale glow of the Kilauea Street lights all was blackness. Then the headlights of a car flashed briefly, sending out long, fan-shaped beams that cut through the dark and were momentarily transfigured on the surface of the pond. Pio. Gone.

"Sō ka ne," he whispered, "of course," amused that he did not have the language to phrase the questions he had wanted to ask today, of Mrs. Kinoshita, Amy, and her parents.

He looked into the dark where the light had been and listened. There was nothing. Chuckling to himself, satisfied, he turned and went back to his room.

The Grandmother

She was ninety-five years old, Frances said. That was old, but she could have been one hundred and fifty for all the difference it made to me. I believed Frances. Mrs. Furuisato was the oldest person I had ever seen, and in those years we lived on the hill, she never changed. Frances teaches school in Honolulu now. I hear she is married and has two children. Her grandmother is long dead I know. And yet I cannot separate the old woman from the place, and I think I do not want to go back and see the house and the garden because she will not be there.

Nostalgia tends to select. I have never forgotten how she looked that first time, before I met her granddaughter who would be my best friend throughout childhood, before the frail bent figure had become a part of the place, a fixture both fascinating and terrifying, like the hothouse with its sweaty flasks or the cooking shed with its strange smells. We had only days before moved into the house on the hill, and because my parents were busy, I was left to wander about on my own, quite forgotten. A row of hibiscus bushes separated our yard from theirs, and I was sitting in this hedge near the cooking shed when the old woman walked past.

First I saw her feet, withered and veined, the color of dried shrimp, with chalk-white nails so long they grew into the flesh. She was wearing grass slippers. Through the hedge I could see her white dress, and moments later I could hear noises coming from the shed. Curious and a little scared, I emerged from my hiding place and on hands and knees crossed the narrow path where she had walked only moments before. Carefully I edged along the side of the hut and peered around the corner. There was no one there.

The room was small, windowless, just three walls and a dirt floor. Along the back walls were several shelves crowded with empty bottles and odd-shaped flasks. Just inside the open front was a small cooking pit lined with stones and covered with wire grating. Next to the pit was a low table and on it a wooden rice pot, a blackened water kettle, and a plate of dried fish with long wooden chopsticks laid across it. The room smelled of old things and charcoal burning.

I don't know how long I stood there, the old woman forgotten, but suddenly I

sensed a movement behind me and heard a low laugh. That impression, in the moments before I ran, has never left me completely, and because of the strength of that impression I remain in awe of Frances' grandmother. She comes to me sometimes, even now, just as she was that first day, a shriveled-up shell of a woman standing sideways looking at me, her head sunk low into her narrow shoulders, her veined hands bent as if they clutched at something, her dress falling loosely from the hump on her back, hanging as if there were nothing underneath. And the low laughter.

"Furancesu," she called her granddaughter, enunciating each syllable. "Fu-ra-n-ce-su."

"She's calling you," I said. We were sitting in the old guava tree below the last terrace.

"I know," Frances said nonchalantly. "You want to come?"

We went up toward the cooking shed, and standing at the top of the last rise was Mrs. Furuisato, holding something in her apron. She didn't say a word as we approached but turned into the shed and knelt at the cooking pot. We stood behind her, watching as she emptied the contents of her apron onto a newspaper. They were little knobs, brown and wrinkled. I said to Frances, "They look like fingertips."

"Sweet potatoes," she replied. "She saves them for me. Watch."

The old woman poked at the ashes with her chopsticks and made a hole in the middle of the heap. Under the grey ash the coals glowed for a moment, then faded into pinpoints of orange. She put the potato ends into the hole and covered them with hot ashes.

"It doesn't take long," Frances said. She helped the old woman sit down. We waited there, the three of us, Mrs. Furuisato on her low stool, Frances and I on the floor close to the fire. I could feel the heat against my legs and face. No one said anything, but occasionally the old woman would murmur "Furancesu" and chuckle to herself. Frances watched the heap of coals. I tried not to fidget.

When we could smell the potatoes, Mrs. Furuisato reached for a newspaper, got up from her stool, and squatted before the fire. She thrust the chopsticks through the ashes and searched out the little knobs, now grey and steaming, and put them one by one on the newspaper. When she finished she handed the paper to Frances.

"Come on," said Frances, "let's go down to the tree."

We retraced our steps down the hill, Frances holding the newspaper in front of her with both hands. I looked back, just once, and Mrs. Furuisato was standing in front of the shed at the top of the last rise, old and bent in her faded dress with the white apron. Sitting in the tree, we ate the potatoes. They were sweet and earthy, but what I remember most is the lingering aftertaste of ashes.

Who can remember precisely when wonderment gives way to something else? Mrs. Furuisato was old—I could see that. She was also a grandmother.

The Grandmother

I knew that because Frances said so. But to me, grandmothers were different creatures. When they smiled their gums didn't show. They were tolerant people, closer to you than your own parents, easy to talk to, easy to love. Mrs. Furuisato *was* Frances' grandmother, and because everyone loved their grandmothers, I reasoned that Frances had to love hers. I had not pondered upon this logic. It was just so. Still, I saw that her face was more skull than flesh, and there was always about her the aura of old wood and charcoal burning.

Frances' family raised orchid hybrids, and their back yard was terraced. Rows of tree fern lined the flat portions. Each trunk had been shorn of its foliage and fixed to the ground. Tied to them with wire and twine were countless orchid cuttings. From some of them sprays of orchids shot out every which way, and we had to be reminded again and again not to run down the cinder paths or we would break something.

Our favorite place was the greenhouse. It stood in a corner of the yard sheltered from the wind and was partially shaded by a wall of giant tree fern. A red cinder path lined with azalea bushes led to an entrance framed with hanging wire baskets of maidenhair. Inside, all was transformed. Sunlight filtered through in patterned stripes, intensifying the greens and purples. The flasks glowed with a light of their own, and their air was laced with the damp smell of tree moss and the heady fragrance of cattleyas. The flasks contained hundreds of orchid seedlings in a water medium. They were particularly vulnerable to disease, so they lived in their sealed containers until they were old enough to be transplanted. I don't know how long it took them to mature and flower, but I believe it was a long, long time.

Frances and I often played there, but sometimes I came alone, just to be in that otherness. When I left it would be quietly, aware of the cinder beneath my bare feet. It was at such a time that they found me there, Frances and her grandmother. I had not heard them approach, so the old woman's low laugh startled me. She brushed gently past, and I caught the smell of old wood and charcoal burning. A few feet in front of me she paused and reached among the clay pots and singled out one plant with three deep purple blooms. The roots had traced a complex pattern around the clay pot. She spoke something in Japanese I couldn't understand. I kept thinking that the cinder hurt my feet.

After a few moments of silence Frances said, "That's the oldest. All the others come from this plant." She stepped around me to join her grandmother. "My father says this one's older than he is." She took the plant from the old woman, placed it back on the shelf, and pulled at some bits of moss.

Again the old woman said something, most of which I didn't understand. But I didn't miss the last word.

"Purebred."

And Frances said again, "It's very, very old." I hardly heard her, though, be-

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo

cause I was staring at her grandmother's face, at the toothless mouth, at the purple flesh. Something in the meeting of the word and the experience had alienated me. I was alone. Not like them.

That is all I remember. I don't know what we did after that. It might have been any number of things, all lost. But I do know that it was in the weeks after that chance meeting that I decided to destroy the plant, to deliberately crush each flower, to snap the stems and grind them into the cinder, to pull from the pot the moss that held the plant and sustained it, to rub from the pot all traces of the white roots.

They never told my parents. Never complained. Frances and I played together until we reached intermediate school and different interests pulled us apart. She was my first and only Japanese friend. But she is as alien to me as that part of myself which is like her. As alien as her grandmother was. Old Mrs. Furuisato.

Fathers

On a rainy Saturday morning Sara walked into the kitchen with blood all over the front of her pink flannel nightie. “I fell on the milk bottle,” she cried, holding up her skinny arm.

Liz and I stared at the neat V in her forearm. It gaped back at us, spewing blood over a tongue-like flap. Blood dripped down her nightie, soaked her bunny rabbit slippers, pooled on the floor. But we didn’t scream. Only Sara screamed. “Make it stop!”

Mother dropped the spatula into the pan, spattering the front of her white terry cloth robe with hot grease. “Oh my god!” she cried and averted her face. The eggs kept right on frying.

Daddy stood up from the table, took three determined steps, swooped Sara into his arms, carried her to the sink, and wrapped a dishtowel around her arm. “Call the hospital,” he said to Mother.

He held Sara tightly. “You’re too little to carry milk bottles,” he said. Then he kissed her.

The Confession

“A sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ to give grace.”

—*The Baltimore Catechism*

The call came long and slow as if from a great distance. Amy put down the pocket knife, scooped up the largest pieces of wood and stuffed them into the back pocket of her jeans. She had been shaping a panax branch into a sword. After testing the tip with her thumb, she folded the knife and brushed all traces of wood from the concrete surface of the survey tower. A faint breeze raised gooseflesh on her arms and left faint indentations in the California grass. She hated to leave. The tower sat like a small fortress on the crest of the hill, and from this vantage point she had an unbroken view of her surroundings: the town strung out around the wide curve of the bay, then the breakwater and the sea, behind her the two great peaks. There was another reason the place held such an attraction. The tower was forbidden. “You are never to go there,” she had been warned. Amy’s mother often spoke in absolutes, yet these dictums lacked the restrictive nature of other commands and frequently enticed rather than hindered. To disobey mother was venial. To disobey the church was mortal. The problem was keeping the two separate, to know one from the other. Venial and mortal. She had been struggling with such distinctions all afternoon.

The call came again, sharper, insistent. She turned toward it. “Coming,” she answered to herself. Directly below were the gabled roofs of the houses on her street. Beyond were cane field, scrub forest, and because there was no rain, the blue volcanic hills on the horizon.

She slapped the back pocket that held the knife and, sword in one hand, climbed down the seven pipe rungs and dropped lightly to the ground. Reluctantly, she hid the sword at the base of the tower, then entered the shoulder-high grass. Long blades whipped her arms and face. A Christmas berry tree separated wilderness and garden, its branches reaching over a metal fence into a well-tended back yard. She scaled this last obstacle quickly, and once on the other side

The Confession

felt safe. Now all she had to do was skirt the terraced bank, walk the lava wall along the side of the property, and cross the street. When she heard the call again she was turning into her driveway.

She stopped by her father's DeSoto to catch her breath. Bernice, the Portuguese woman who helped around the house, was waiting for her. "I'm home," Amy said.

"Your mother was worried." Bernice put an ample arm around Amy's shoulders. "Where'd you go? You're supposed to be home at five o'clock." When Amy didn't answer, she asked, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Bernie. Don't worry."

A somewhat troubled looking Bernice opened the back door, and Amy followed her into the house. A pressure hinge kept the door from slamming, and Amy heard it hiss before she was enveloped in the heat of the kitchen, the smell of food. Her mother was taking a large casserole out of the oven. She put it on top of the stove.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"I was up at Teddy's," Amy said, tugging at her sleeve. "In the eggroom. I came as soon as I heard." She turned to go.

"Amy?"

"Yes." She faced her mother, who regarded her with a raised eyebrow.

"Bernice called you three times."

"I know," said Amy, aware that her lie was surfacing. One more question and it would be out. But she was reprieved.

"Mrs. Freitas," said Bernice, "I have to go. My brother's here. He got the truck today."

"I'm sorry, Bernice. I completely forgot. Go ahead. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"You sure you don't need anything?"

"No. No, everything's fine." She turned to Amy. "Go get cleaned up. You're a mess."

Her father was engrossed in the paper. Sara, Amy's youngest sister, played at his feet. Maybe, thought Amy, she should begin with the sword. Yes, he would like the part about the sword. Then she could tell him why she made it. And he would understand. After all, he too was a soldier of Christ. But before she could begin, her mother called for help from the kitchen. From behind his newspaper, he said, "Go help your mother, OK?"

"I have to clean up," she protested, showing her hands.

"Well, then call Lizbet." He lowered the paper, smiled, then added, "For Daddy?"

Amy went quietly into her parents' bedroom. The large windows faced east toward the bay. She closed the blinds and turned on the light. A double bed cov-

ered in green was flanked by identical maple nightstands and two old pewter lamps her mother treasured. Three Japanese woodcuts were centered above the headboard. Amy's favorite showed a persimmon tree, the fruit bright orange against the black branches. Near the closet was her mother's uncluttered vanity. The alabaster jars were from Italy—Uncle Tadashi had brought them back after the war—and the tortoise-shell hand mirrors were a gift from Japan.

On the other side of the room was her father's dresser. A familiar assortment of his things lay on the bureau top—blue tin of Old Granger tobacco, pipestand, calabash for loose change, ashtray heaped with matches and discarded pipe cleaners. There was a photograph of her parents on their wedding day, and next to it a small gold-framed picture of Jesus holding open his robe to expose his heart. Amy read the words: "I will bless every place where a picture of my heart shall be exposed and honored." Amy opened the top drawer and laid the knife under a pile of folded handkerchiefs. Then, remembering her father's request, she went down the hall to her sister's room.

"Daddy says help Mother."

Lizbet put down her book. "I bet you went to the tower," she said. "The fence is bent. But I won't tell if you take me. Please Amy?"

Amy ignored her and stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. The tower was not her sister's place.

The face in the mirror above the sink was neither Asian nor Caucasian. There was little color difference between hair and skin; both were light brown. Her hair, cut severely, fit like a little helmet. The face was long, angular, with high cheek bones, amber eyes, and full lips. Dark brows met faintly over her nose in an almost perpetual frown. It was a face capable of of, but not given to, animation. Amy did not like it. "Tiga-eye, tiga-eye," she said to her reflection. Once, for a whole month, she had slept with a clothespin clipped to the end of her nose because her mother said it looked like Grandma Freitas'.

Her ministrations done, Amy threw the towel carelessly over the rack. Hesitating, she studied the towel for a moment as if contemplating an opponent. Then, whipping it off and holding it lengthwise, the end under her chin, she folded it and draped it carefully back over the rack.

"Bless us O Lord and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord and Amen." Amy studied her father over the centerpiece as he helped Sara finish the blessing. "In the name of the Father, Honey, in the name of the Father, yes, and of the Son, no the left first, and of the Holy Ghost. Good girl, Amen."

Meals were an occasion. Amy put her left hand on her lap and picked up her fork with her right. She loved the circle of faces over the white tablecloth, the heavy feel of silver, the ritual of serving. Yet the attentions to behavior both irritated and confused her. Surely meals in other homes weren't so formal. At Bernie's they just grabbed and ate, and whoever grabbed more got more. Every-

The Confession

body laughed and talked with their mouths full. At Grandma Kinoshita's house, they ate with chawan and hashi. Uncle Tadashi slouched on his elbows and made noises into his ricebowl, but no one said anything about manners.

She wiped her mouth with her napkin and thought about how to tell him. Maybe she should begin with the hard part first.

"Daddy?" she asked, "can only Catholics go to heaven?"

"What?" he said, a forkful of food suspended between mouth and plate.

She repeated the question.

"Well," he began, putting down his fork. He looked quickly at his wife. "Not necessarily."

"I told Harold Deikman he couldn't go to heaven."

"You did what?" Amy now had his attention.

"Because he's a Protestant, and Father Goodman said Protestants can't go to heaven."

"When did you say that to Harold?" her mother asked. Amy didn't want her mother to take the lead, but there was no way to avoid answering.

"Today."

"At school?"

Amy nodded. The truth was getting out of hand. She looked over at her mother's fingers, which were tapping gently on the edge of the table. Her mother's hands were fine-fingered but large enough to span ten keys on the piano. Amy tried desperately to remember the lesson on lies.

"Amy." Her mother again. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

Amy looked up at her father from under her brows. "I said it in Mrs. Dever's class. She was asking about what church everyone went to, and Harold bragged about his church, about the missionaries starting it and everything. So I told him."

"Right in class? What did Mrs. Dever say? Was she angry?"

Amy took a deep breath, the memory of the humiliation still fresh. "Yes. She said we have freedom of religion in this country. She made a face like this—"

Lizbet giggled, and Amy turned on her. "Shut *up*!"

"Don't speak that way to your sister."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, then what happened?"

"She made a horrible face at me"—Amy glared for a moment at her sister—"and said no church is better. Everyone can go to heaven. Even Buddhists!"

No one said anything.

"But she was wrong," Amy insisted. "I told her sin makes your soul look like a leper to God, all full of sores and no toes or fingers. Only confession can take it away. I was going to say about how good it felt, but she told me to sit down." Amy turned to her father. "*We are* the true church, aren't we Daddy? Daddy, *look* at me."

"Yes," he sighed finally. "We're the true church."

Amy felt a wave of relief.

"But you don't tell people they aren't going to heaven," her mother added.

"Father Goodman said only Catholics can go to heaven. He said it," Amy insisted, repeating the words she had memorized in preparation for her confirmation: "Unless you eat of my flesh you will not have life in you."

"Look," her father began, using the same voice he did with Sara, "Mother's saying you don't tell people that. OK? Not just anybody. You hear Daddy? Keep it to yourself."

Amy thought about that for a moment. Something was wrong. In the book of martyrs they gave her at catechism, Saint Dorothy died on the wheel for speaking the truth. And what about the missionaries and the poor pagan children?

"But if you don't tell them, they might go to hell. Shouldn't you tell them so they can do something about it? I told Harold if he came to our church he wouldn't burn..."

"That's enough, you two," said her mother. "Look at me, Amy. You don't have a monopoly on heaven just because you're Catholic. I'm not a Catholic. Grandma and Grandpa aren't Catholic. Are we going to hell, Amy? Is that what they teach you in your church?" Sara began to whimper. "Don't cry, baby. Mommy's not angry."

But her face looked as if it couldn't decide to cry or be angry. Amy had seen that look once before, and as she did at that time, she felt helpless and confused. Her mother had waited and waited, then cried after she got angry. That was when Daddy came home too late for a party. They said things to each other. Angry things. Amy had never seen her mother cry before, and she was mad at Daddy for making Mommy cry. The dress had been so beautiful, black velvet with long, wide sleeves lined with pale, flesh-colored silk. "Here, Amy-chan. Feel this. See? It's silk, Amy-chan."

Her parents looked at each other over the lilies. Lizbet left the table without saying "Excuse me" and no one said anything. Sara climbed down to the floor. Amy watched her mother's hands resume their quiet tapping. "You see?" her mother said into the lilies. "This is what comes of it. I should never have promised. It was a mistake. Sometimes I think I've lost her." She paused for a moment. "What on earth will Mrs. Dever think?"

The light from the street filtered through the venetian blinds, making pale stripes across Amy's bed. She held up her arms, and they were marked too. The brass chain on the ceiling fixture gleamed. Amy crossed her arms over her chest, turned on her side, and pulled her knees up close. The closet door was open, a great black portal that made her shut her eyes and think about something she had heard. About the darkness, the lights far away. The tower on the hill. Wild dogs in the cane fields. Grass against her face. Amy thought about the wind in the California grass. She had not had a chance to tell her father about the sword, about

The Confession

the name she had chosen for herself.

The house creaked and settled. In the next room Lizbet murmured in her sleep. Amy wished she could crawl in bed with her sister. She heard her father's footsteps and waited for the sound of the shower. Her mother had been quiet for the rest of the evening. Amy tried to think of something else.

"Fuck," she whispered, and felt the mystery of the forbidden, the pleasure it gave to say the word. Like the mystery of the mass. "Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus. Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory."

The shower stopped, then a few minutes later her parents' voices reached her. They were arguing. "I'm sorry, Mommy and Daddy," she whispered. Thoughts crowded in on her, rustling like dry leaves. That word! "Oh my God, I'm heartily sorry for having offended thee, my Lord, who art all good and deserving of all my love." Her last prayer ended, "And blessed is the fruit of thy womb." And what was fruit of thy womb? Fuck, she thought sleepily, she would ask Father Goodman. He would know.

Winterpear 1951

In September he watched the tree. He always watched the tree in the fall. This year was not like the one before. It was an off year. Every other year they would harvest the cane in the fields surrounding the hill. The fields would burn for days, and clouds of smoke would drift overhead, dropping ashes like rain. Ash was everywhere. The lawns would be black with it, and the trees too, as if stricken with some strange blight. The winterpear flowered in September, and the tender white flowers were particularly vulnerable. They would fall, making large patches of white on the ground beneath the tree, and in December the avocado crop would be small. But the field would burn, every other year, until the green vanished and the harvesting could begin. And everyone breathed ashes for days.

So he watched the winterpear, and because this was an off year he watched all the more carefully. His name was Mr. Freitas, Joseph Freitas, but even the neighborhood children called him Grampa. He was seventy-five years old, barrel-chested, straight-backed, a large, powerfully built man who could easily lift a hundred-pound bale. Every day—except Sunday when he went to mass—he wore a sweat-stained pith helmet, faded cotton palaka shirt, baggy denim overalls stuffed into rubber boots. The helmet shaded a face burned the color of tobacco, the skin stretched shiny over surprisingly fine bones. It was an aristocratic face, the nose hawk-like, eyes deep-set, mouth firm. Age had set the expression, but something else had raised the chin. His daughter-in-law called him a stubborn old man. His eldest son said, “Pops? I don’t argue with him. No use.” His grandchildren loved him. But they avoided his hands which were apt to squeeze too tightly and leave bruises.

When he was three years old he had sailed to these islands from Madeira in a clipper ship. He had worked in the mill in Hilo when a young man, then as a foreman in Wailea until his hearing gave out. Now he cleaned yards for his sons and his sons’ families. It gave him something to do.

He was on the hill that day, watching the winterpear that grew in the backyard of his eldest son’s house. Mr. Furuisato, who was tending orchids next door, saw him standing above the first terrace and walked over.

"Bad crop this year, Mr. Freitas."

"What?" shouted the old man.

"Bad crop," Mr. Furuisato shouted back, pointing to the fruit tree.

"I going plant one more avocado after Christmas," Mr. Freitas answered. He gestured toward the house. "In the front yard. Higher." Mr. Furuisato nodded, and Mr. Freitas continued. "I told my son he need more mangoes, but the wife don't want that tree cut." He stared at the jacaranda as if it were an enemy and shook his head. "Too much rubbish."

Mr. Furuisato, following his stare, may have been reminded of his orchids. He nodded, bowed several times, and went back to his yard.

The jacaranda would bloom purple in midwinter. Already the branches were heavy with leaves. Mr. Freitas looked back at the avocado, then at Mr. Furuisato; he picked up his rake and walked toward the fruit tree. But the tree would bear in midwinter, he thought. There were white flowers on the ground.

When he finished raking he gathered his tools, shouldered the partly filled burlap rubbish bag, and walked up the slope toward the house. At the foot of the long stairway he paused briefly to catch his breath, then turned once more to the winterpear before walking slowly up the steps.

He worked on the front yard for about an hour. Mowed the lawn, weeded the flower beds, clipped the mock orange that grew along the driveway. After raking everything into neat little piles, he walked into the garage to rest. A table was set up for him with a large pitcher of ice water, a glass, and two lemons.

He cut a lemon in half with his pocketknife, squeezed the juice into the glass, and poured the water over the juice. He sat down and drank half of it. Taking off his pith helmet and pulling a handkerchief out of his back pocket, he wiped his face and the top of his head. He finished the drink, put the glass back on the tray, and reached for his Pall Malls. He lit a cigarette and sucked deeply on it, many times, until the lit end touched his fingers. Then he flicked away the burning tip and after putting the stub into his shirt pocket stood up with a great sigh and walked out into the yard.

He stopped by the mock orange hedge and surveyed his work. Good. Only have to clip three, four times a year. Planted it himself when his son bought the property. His eye moved to his daughter-in-law's flower beds along the front of the property. Red ti leaves and begonias. But enough shade for parsley, he thought. Maybe next week. Now where to plant the winterpear next year? He studied the elderberry tree that grew near the garage and wondered why he had never cut it down. But she liked the tree and the children ate the berries.

"Grampa. Have some berries!"

"Nah. Junk. No taste."

"But Grampa! Look!" One by one his little granddaughter had popped the berries between her thumb and forefinger and put them into her mouth, until lips and fingers turned purple, until there were stains between her teeth when she

smiled. But pears, he thought. Good. With bread. And he thought about the heavy feel of the fruit in his hands, the rough, hard, purple-black skin, the pale green buttery flesh. Good. Next year I plant the tree, he determined. He took out his handkerchief, removed his helmet, and wiped his face and head. He was thirsty again. It was hot.

When he bent down to pick up the bag he felt the first pain. It came again, harder, a sharp blow to his chest that took his breath away. He let the bag drop and fell to his knees. He knelt there, taking deep breaths, feeling the pain subside into a dull tight ache. The tools, he thought. The tools. Slowly he got to his feet, gathered rake, hoe, cutters, sickle, and limped to the stairs leading to the basement. The descent was difficult. He had to hold all the tools in one hand so he could hold on to the railing with the other. But he managed it. And he managed to put the tools away, each hung on the proper hook. The thought of bringing down the lawnmower was too much, though. He would leave it in the garage today, against the wall.

The garage was cool and dark and he wanted to sit there in the coolness, at his table with the pitcher of water, the glass, and the lemon all neatly on the tray. But his chest hurt. It hurt to breathe. He was very tired. He walked next door to Mrs. Donohough's. When she got to the door he was sitting on the steps. "Mr. Freitas!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"Please Missus. Call my son."

When the blue Chevrolet turned into the driveway twenty minutes later, Mr. Freitas was in his chair in the garage. Mr. Furuisato and Mrs. Donohough stood nearby. They didn't notice the bag of rubbish in the yard. No one did, really. Not till later. It had fallen open, and there were leaves and tiny white flowers all over the grass.

Sisters

You've got to understand about Amy. She's not exactly hateful. In fact I like her a lot. I used to like her because she was tough, but now I like her because I know she breaks easily. Once at a carnival Mama bought me a glass sailboat. Sara broke it the next day, but I've still got the pieces.

Amy often gets a faraway look, and I know she's off somewhere. Sometimes I know where she is, but the feeling doesn't last long. It must be hard being the oldest, not that it's so easy being in the middle and told to get lost all the time.

That's what Amy told me this morning. I said "Mother said get up," and she said "Bug off." Mama called from the kitchen, and Amy sat up and glared at me. Like it was my fault.

At breakfast Mama started checking off her list of things to do for the day. Dad had softball practice, so her list was longer than usual. Dad was trying not to look guilty about running off, but the game was tomorrow. I wanted to say, "Daddy, can I go with you?" like Amy used to, but I didn't. Amy just sat there with that faraway look. Dad had to ask for the milk twice; she didn't hear him the second time and he thought she was being rude. "Amy will help," he finally said.

I wanted to tell Amy that I didn't give a damn whether or not she got up when Mama wanted her to, and if I said "Mother said" it was only because Mama was always ordering me to tell her things.

I really love you, Amy, I wanted to say. And you can be hateful and you can lie, but what you are is not as bad as how they make you feel you are. I didn't really understand then what it was about Amy that I loved. All I knew is that if she found out about what I was doing and how I was feeling, she would really hate me. Forever.

Mais Fica

It never failed. At 5:30 sharp Grandpa Freitas sat at the head of the kitchen table, and the rest of us would have to rush in or we would miss grace.

Always the meal began with soup. Sometimes a rich red bean soup made with ham hock, sausage, pumpkin, and watercress. Or a clear broth floating with kale and seasoned with lots of garlic. Grandpa loved mint and egg soup, the mint fresh from his garden, but we children considered anything from the herb patch highly suspect ever since we caught him urinating on the parsley. The soup we liked best was Grandma's vegetable soup with macaroni.

Grandpa squeezed lemon into his soup, a habit from childhood. When there was no lemon he asked for vinegar. "It's good, Manuela. You try." Manuela was his nickname for me. He never called me by my real name.

We ate Grandma's milk bread with the soup. We ate it plain, without butter. Sweet bread was for special occasions or church feast days like Easter and Christmas. Grandma's recipe was famous. She told us it had a secret ingredient.

After the soup came the main dish. Pickled codfish was a typical meal. Grandma would cut a huge sheet of dried cod into pieces and soak them in water. After the salt was removed, she put the fish in a baking pan and covered it with vinegar, bay leaves, garlic, parsley, and lots of red pepper. She used this mixture to season other things—fresh fish, pork, beef, chicken. She even poured it over canned sardines. Whenever she cooked with *vinha d'alhos*, everyone in the neighborhood knew what we were having for dinner.

Grandma made her own sausage. She had to chop the pork, season it, and stuff it into sausage casings. Then she would smoke the sausages for a long time over a wood fire. Oh but they were good steamed with cabbage and potatoes. Another favorite was fried blood sausage with scallions.

When I was growing up, Grandma cooked her rice island-style, boiled and steamed with no salt. But when my father was a child, rice was always seasoned and cooked with beef bones, vegetables, or beans. She also served potatoes and a kind of fried mush made from white cornmeal and wheat.

After the main meal Grandpa had fresh fruit with bread. I never learned to

Mais Fica

eat fruit this way, but I loved watching his big hands slice an apple or cut through a Madeira orange. I liked the way he ate the fruit off the sharp edge of the knife and broke the bread with his fingers.

“Bread and fruit,” he always said. “Good.” It was like a blessing. “Here, eat.” And when I refused the offering, he would say, “Hah! *Mais fica*.” More for me.

Morning

November, 1958

He was in a private school in Honolulu when his father died. They summoned him to the chaplain's office and kept him waiting for ten minutes in the small straight-backed chair facing the polished koa double doors to the inner office. Just when he was beginning to wonder whether there had been some problem, the doors opened and the chaplain, tall and grey haired, motioned him to come in, then held the door open and called him "Son." Ted entered the room, aware of the unexpected familiarity, aware too of the hand on his shoulder guiding him firmly but gently to another straight-backed chair facing the huge desk.

They sat down, the boy first; then the man leaned forward, placed his elbows on the desk, clasped his beautifully manicured hands beneath his chin, cleared his throat, and told the boy that his father had died. For his mother's sake, he would have to be very brave.

Ted thought nothing at first. All he could do was stare mutely across the wide, polished desk at the grave face trying to be kind and wonder, in that first long pause, if he should say something. But he was saved by more words of sympathy. He listened. The face in front of him said how it had happened suddenly the night before. "You will have to go home for a few days, Ted," the face said. "I have made all the necessary arrangements." Was that all there was to it, he thought, watching the face blur into the light of the window behind it and come slowly into focus. The first news. There hadn't been much more to it, although later he remembered thinking as he left the office, how strange it was that his father had died the night before, and he hadn't known until morning.

By the time he got off the plane at the little outer island airport, he felt he had resolved things. He was not a child. His mother would need him now. He didn't show his disappointment when she was not there to meet him—of course she would not be there—and he was especially polite to Mr. Cutter, his father's attorney, who stood at the gate, looking anxious and strained. Mr. Cutter had carried his bags to the large black sedan, had held the door for him, had said, "There now, Son. You just sit right there." So he did. And without showing his irritation.

Morning

They had not talked about his father during the short ride through the town and to the hill, except that Mr. Cutter had said, "Your mother is anxious to see you." But he knew that.

When they got to the house on the hill he saw nothing out of the ordinary. There were no crowds of mourners, no cars strange or familiar. The house looked the same. There was his father's pickup truck parked in the garage next to his mother's Packard. Just as it always was. When Mr. Cutter said for him to go upstairs, that he would take care of the suitcase, he had gone up the front steps and had not entered the house through the garage.

"Mother?" he called as he walked in. There was no answer. Except for the quiet tap of the venetian blinds, the house was quiet. He walked down the hall to her bedroom and paused at the open door.

His mother was sitting at her desk, her back to him. She was reading something, totally absorbed. The desk was covered with papers. She dropped what she was reading, uncrumpled, into the wastebasket and picked up another sheet. How reposed she was. He wanted to go to her and put his hand on her shoulder near the place where her black hair touched her collar.

"Mother?" he said instead.

She turned. "Teddy," she murmured, then rose and came to him with quick steps. "Teddy," she said again, her face close. She was so beautiful. And holding her, feeling the past in a rush, feeling the black hair against his chin, he felt he just might cry. He had gotten taller.

She held him at arm's length. "Teddy. Come and sit down, dearest. Here on the bed. There's something Mother has to tell you."

"I know. I know all about it," he said, repeating what the chaplain had told him earlier. But she wasn't listening to him. She was staring at a point just beyond his left shoulder.

When she did speak, her voice was dead. "No, Teddy. You don't know." And then she told him his father had killed himself.

That couldn't be, he thought. No. But she wouldn't stop.

She said how something had wakened her in the night, just before the screaming started downstairs. She had gone down to the workshop and he was lying on the floor, and Pearl was bending over him, hysterical, her hands covered with blood. She had thought for a moment there had been an accident, but then she saw the shotgun, and on the floor and walls the blood. And his head, oh God, there was so much blood. She had looked at Pearl, and Pearl stopped making those noises and was looking at her. Something in Pearl's eyes had frightened her, and she ran upstairs, upstairs to her room to call Mr. Cutter—she couldn't think straight—who said he'd call the police and for her not to touch anything. She had stayed in her room with the door locked until the police came.

"Where's Pearl?" he asked, trying to focus his eyes.

His mother blinked. "She's in her room. She's been there since the police left

this morning.”

From behind him a voice said, “I just spoke with her, Mare.” Ted started, but it was only Mr. Cutter. “She said she would straighten things up downstairs.”

So that’s why there’s no one here, he thought. Only Mr. Cutter. But people had stopped coming long before he was sent away to school. His friends stopped coming a long time ago. Even Amy. But that was before. No. That was before he knew. Wait, he was very confused.

He looked at his mother who was looking at Mr. Cutter. “Is he still down there?”

“No, dearest. They took him away this morning.”

“Oh,” he heard himself say. He was thinking, but what about Pearl? Would they take *her* away? Of course they wouldn’t. He was just confused. She had been there so long, almost as long as he could remember. He would have to go down to see her. But he couldn’t go down to the eggroom. Not yet. But there would be no reason for her to stay any longer. No reason at all. Not now, anyway.

November, 1950

He sat on the bottom step, a black lunch pail by his side, and watched old Mr. Correa two houses away back the long dark blue sedan toward the street. He waited for the scrape of metal against concrete as the car hit the dip at the end of the driveway, but nothing happened, and he watched the car move slowly down the street, round the bend, and disappear down the hill. He could see everything from where he sat. The street was empty.

The front door closed above him and he turned. White, white legs in black open-toed pumps. A flash of pale lace against the dark skirt. He got up; his mother came down the steep steps. “There you are, Teddy,” she said.

“Morning,” he said shyly. He hadn’t seen his mother at breakfast. He had gotten up at five-thirty and eaten with his father and Pearl in the kitchen before helping them load the cardboard egg cases onto the truck. His mother got up an hour later. By that time he had watched Pearl and his father drive off. He hadn’t felt like going upstairs again. Besides, he liked to wait for his mother on the front steps. And he was never late.

He followed her into the garage and stood behind her while she unlocked the front door of the car, watched her reach round inside to unlock his door, the back one, before getting in herself. He closed his door as she started the engine.

“Roll down your window, Teddy.”

“Okay.” He took one long breath.

“You’re quiet this morning,” she said. The car made its way past the first bend and moved down the hill. “Did your father say when he and Pearl would be back?”

“Pearl said she’d be home this afternoon.” Already his mother’s smell was gone. “I can walk home.”

Morning

"Of course. Pearl's always home to meet you."

"I know," he said agreeably. His mother was right. He thought about the day Pearl had come to their house and moved into the bedroom down the hall from the rooms he and his father slept in. His mother's room was upstairs, with the white, white carpet and the cream colored bedspread which was as shiny as his mother's slippers. He had been afraid of Pearl, he could remember that much, afraid of the flat brown face and the black hair bristling out stiff and straight from under her bandanna. "This is Theodore," his father had said, because his father always called him Theodore. But Pearl had called him something else when they were alone, and he hated that name.

Pearl did everything and helped with the chickens. His mother hated the chickens; he couldn't recall her ever going out to the place in the country where the coops were. Pearl dressed him in the morning before he could do things himself. Her arms were very dark and they were covered with black hair. There was even hair on her fingers, but you only saw that if you looked closely.

He looked at his mother, at the black hair cut short and curly above the white collar. He sat up and rested his arms on the back of the front seat, his head close to her shoulder. The two white hairs were gone. She would never have white hair. It would always look black and silky. His father had white hair. His father had hardly any hair at all.

After school he walked up the hill holding his lunch pail so that it banged against his right knee. It made a sound like a drum. He continued his march until he reached the house on the cul-de-sac. His father's truck was parked in the garage, and he walked around it to enter the house through the door at the rear. It led into a long hallway. Immediately to the right of the entrance was the door to Pearl's room. It was shut. Down the hall was his room, and next to it was his father's. At the far end of the hall were the stairs. One flight led upstairs. The other, narrower, went down to the office and the eggroom. Pearl would be down there.

"Boy?" he heard. She was down there.

"Yes," he answered, and he started upstairs. His friends liked the eggroom. His father didn't mind them down there as long as they didn't touch anything. They would watch the baby chicks in the incubators or Pearl sorting the eggs. She would hold each one up to the small light bulb and put it on the tray, laughing and talking to them about those eggs and the breeding hens, about the coffee farm where she grew up with all those brothers. Sometimes she let them walk through the coops at the bottom of the hill and watch her feed the chickens, or she let them hold the basket when she picked up the eggs. Sometimes. And always as a reward. And there was the garden. But he didn't like it down there. The garden smelled of manure.

That night he lay in his bed watching the shadows on the ceiling. He had been awake a long time and he wished he could fall asleep. Why couldn't he fall

asleep? He could hear in the room next to his a drawer pushed shut, a door opening, the sound of water running. There was something he was trying to remember, but when he tried to think what it was, it slipped somewhere. That was why he couldn't sleep. Soon he would have to go to the bathroom again, but he was afraid to walk down the hall. He was trying to remember and he was afraid. But the water kept running.

It was the garden. The water was running like the hose in the garden. It was the garden and the eggroom. He was in the garden at the bottom of the hill near the coops. The smell of the chickens was very strong. Pearl's garden. He was watching her hoe the black dirt into rows for planting. She was wearing a red bandanna, and her hair stuck out, wet where it touched her face. Her shirt was wet down the middle of her back and under her arms. She started a new furrow, and her hoe cut deep into the black soil and made a large hole where the earth had been. She pulled at the hoe and began breaking up the clods.

"Look, Boy," she said, pushing at the lumps of earth. Then he saw that the freshly broken earth was moving. But it wasn't the dirt that was moving. It was the worms. A nest of them in the garden. Pearl laughed and laughed. "They eat it, Boy," she said, picking up a handful of soil. The worms fell from between her fingers. "They're good for the garden," she called out as he turned away, "they keep the soil rich." But all he could think was that it was like the time he found out what his father did with the dead chicks.

He could hear water running, and his body felt very light. He was walking down the hallway to the bathroom under the stairs, and he was not afraid. He opened the door and he could see something white against the blackness. He was not afraid; he stood over it and relaxed his body.

He woke with a start. His bed was wet and cold, and he lay there feeling a little sick. He wanted his mother, but she was upstairs. Then he heard the noise. He lay there listening as it passed his room and moved slowly down the hall. Just the floorboards creaking softly. Then he heard the door knob turning and the creak of hinges. It was hardly any sound at all. But he did hear it, and it was the door to Pearl's room.

Now he could go to sleep.

Puumaille

The elevator shaft was all that was left of the hospital. It could be seen over the trees just before the coast road narrowed into a dirt lane which dipped and curved through scrub guava and Christmas berry trees. Half a mile from the road the lane widened into a small, paved clearing and the shaft appeared suddenly, gray and stark against the green. California grass had eaten away at the edges of the pavement and pushed through the concrete, rippling the surface with little peaks and crests. Beyond the clearing were the ruins of a sea wall. Huge sections had been knocked down and pushed inland. On the other side of the wall were wind-stunted kamani and a row of hala, then sea grass, black lava beach, and the sea.

The wall followed the coast for about a quarter mile, ending abruptly near some old mullet ponds where the ground was marshy. Two people walked single file through the waist-high grass near the ponds. In the lead was a tall thin boy, crew cut, in jeans and a white T-shirt. He had a blanket slung over his shoulder. Close behind him was a girl holding a woven bag. As she tried to negotiate one of the moss-covered boulders, she slipped and stepped into the mud.

"Goddammit," she muttered. "Look at my feet."

"There's always dirty," he said laughing. "Be careful. Big holes here. We want to keep to the edge. It'll be dry by the trees."

"Okay. Whose idea was this anyway?"

"Yours. But we can go back to the car. You want to go back to the car?"

Amy looked over her shoulder at the tower. "No. I don't like it there," she said. "Let's keep going." When the ground leveled out beyond the ponds she looked around her. "This place is amazing. How'd you know about it? We never go beyond Four Miles."

"A lot of fishermen come here," he said. "I used to come here with my Dad."

When they reached the trees he said, "This is it," spread out the blanket, and sat down. Amy remained standing. "Sit down," he said, patting the space next to him.

"Are you sure nobody comes here?" she asked. He nodded, and with a sigh

of resignation she sat down.

"How come you won't look at me?" he asked after several minutes of silence. "This was your idea, you know. We don't have to go through with it if you don't want to."

"I want to."

"Okay," he said. Then pulling her awkwardly but gently into his arms and dipping her backwards, he lowered his voice. "The handsome pirate carried his captive to the cabin. This won't hurt, Madam, I promise," he said, fixing her with his piercing eyes and—"

"Wait. Teddy?"

"What."

"You're a good friend."

"He's not worth it, Amy."

"Isn't it funny that when you like someone and let them know it they never care about you the same way? I'll never do it again."

"Yeah. You tell me," he said, laying her down. He stretched out next to her on his stomach. She looked up at him, her arm shading her eyes. They were quiet a long time. He bent and kissed her tentatively. First on her forehead, then on her mouth.

After a while, she said, "I can feel you Teddy."

"What do you expect." He started to unbutton her shirt. "I want to look at you."

"You've already seen me, silly."

"Yeah, but that was different."

"You used to like to play doctor. Remember when you forgot to zip your pants and Pearl caught you? We got it that time."

"Look. You've got goosebumps," he said. Amy looked down at her breasts. The nipples were erect. Her face felt warm. She watched his hands, then held his face and pulled him to her.

"Wait," he said, reaching for the corner of the blanket. He pulled it around them and held her very tight.

Amy watched a lone bird circle the tower. Three times it made an approach before disappearing into the second floor opening. She pulled her knees closer to her chest and rested her chin on them.

He said, "My dad said it's a forbidden place, the hospital. It's in the path of the warriors' march, but they built it anyway. The main building was there"—he pointed toward the shaft—"and there were cottages all around for people who worked here."

"Didn't it get destroyed by the tidal wave?"

"No. It got damaged pretty badly, but it was the high seas that wrecked it. I don't know, some time in the forties they started building the new sanitarium."

Puumaile

"I guess a lot of people died here."

"Yeah, but not cause of the wave. Scared?"

"No, but I don't like the parking lot. It really gives me the creeps."

"Amy?"

"What."

"How was it?"

She looked at him and smiled. "You know it was good," she said. She put her chin back on her knees. "I thought it was going to be junk, but it only hurt a little in the beginning." She held herself tighter. "It was good—" She started to cry. "Damn!" she said, "oh, damn."

He reached for her shoulder. "What's the matter? Oh god don't cry."

"Shit," she said, wiping her nose. She giggled. "What am I going to say in confession? 'Father, I did it. I *finally* did it.' After all those impure thoughts, I finally did it."

"He's probably used to it."

"Yeah. I guess."

"Are you sorry?"

She thought about that for a few moments. "No, but I feel funny now. I was trying to get even and I don't feel like I did. I don't know. I can't explain."

"He's not worth it."

Amy looked at the tower again. "I wish you didn't have to go back to school."

"I'll be home for Thanksgiving. And I'll write."

"Me too."

Ten minutes passed. They sat there looking at the sea, holding hands and saying nothing.

"I guess we'd better go," she said softly.

She reached for her bag and stood up. He folded the blanket and draped it over his shoulder. Then the two of them made their way through the marsh grass toward the tower.

Note

Dear Lizbeth and Sara,

Consider our bedrooms. Mine severe, tailored, mannish; yours pink, ruffled, feminine. What happened?

Love,

Amy

Saturday Night

Carla's brother would drive the truck. He was the only one who had a license. I really liked him. He was part Hawaiian, but he had green eyes. Dorothy and her boyfriend were Portuguese, Karen too. Pat, my best friend, was like me.

We'd pile in the pickup, and Larry would take us cruising. We had to sneak out, you know, because it was Hilo and we were only fifteen, sixteen. All we did was smoke, Viceroy and L&M's. One time Larry brought a bottle of Thunderbird, and Dorothy threw up in the truck. But that was the worst thing we ever did.

So I don't know why I was always so scared. First I'd have to wait in my room till my parents were asleep. It felt pretty weird staying up that late, like being a kid again and scared of what was in the closet. Sometimes I'd light a cigarette, just to feel brave. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I'd think, shit, I'll have to get it over with. Except for my shirt, I was usually dressed, and the window and screen would be unhooked. "Please God," I'd think, one leg over the sill, "don't let the screen fall down." It never did.

The best part was the wait at the bottom of the hill. I'd crouch in the hibiscus bushes and watch for headlights. The street ran straight into town, and when the lights appeared, I could see them at Keawe Street. They'd disappear for a fraction of a second at the dip in the road in front of St. Joseph's church, then I could faintly hear the engine. I'd stay in my hiding place, though, because the lights could have belonged to any car. If they stopped two blocks away I'd know it was the truck. Karen and Dorothy would be getting in, a few houses away from their driveway.

When the truck finally reached the top of the street I'd walk out into the glare of the headlights, holding my hands over my eyes, laughing, my heart beating with excitement and happiness. It felt so *good* to get in the back of that truck.

Sometimes we'd stop at Bell's Fountain. There was a juke box, and the parking lot was always full. I loved listening to Earl Bostic in Bell's parking lot. But you'd have to watch for cops, so mostly we'd cruise to Puumaile and just talk and smoke.

We never did anything. That's what I tried so hard to tell my father. "Daddy,

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo
we never *did* anything.” But he’d been waiting for me and he was mad. My mother was crying. I guess I really scared them. They kept asking me if I did anything. And I kept saying no I didn’t, but they wouldn’t listen.

Rosie's Buttons

Remember Rosie, Grandma Freitas' ironing lady? She used to iron in the room off the porch, the small room with the pipe clothes rack. Remember? She wore low cut dresses with flowers all over, red, yellow, bright colors. And buttons, tiny buttons down the front. Dozens of them. She'd iron and iron all morning, until the room got steamy hot and reeked of starch and banana leaves, until her face got pink and shiny and the sweat rolled down her neck and between her breasts. Remember her boyfriend? He'd park his car by the wall in front of the house, and around lunchtime Rosie would say, "Gotta take a break," and pull the plug out of the light socket. We'd watch from the porch, me and Linda, and Grandma would say, "Don't you girls go out there." When Rosie came in, she'd be more red than when she was ironing. "Why you laughing?" she'd ask. We didn't tell her it was the buttons. She *never* got them buttoned right.

My Mother's Tree

Later, we would understand it was because of the tree that she wanted the house. But that was after the incident had become a family story, told and retold.

"Tell us about the tree!" was how it usually began. Sara, the youngest, seldom had anything refused her. We learned this early, Liz and I, and were not above using her for our own ends. For Sara, it was all story, because she was a baby when it happened.

"Well..." Dad would say. In the pause he eyed the two of us, trying to decide who had put Sara up to it. The story was an embarrassment to him. Dad was supposed to have been there when it happened, and after all Grampa Freitas was his father. Guilt by association and proximity. Mother's expression became quietly knowing; we knew she was about to recount something which involved Dad's family. Not that she didn't care about them, she really did. Sara read the "Well..." as a signal and like a puppy managed to place herself as close as possible to Dad. If we were driving anywhere, she'd be next to him in the front seat. If it were after dinner or at bedtime, she'd be in his lap.

"It was the most beautiful tree," Mother would begin, as a preface of sorts, shaking her head, her voice wistful, "a giant crepe myrtle that grew on the back slope. A graceful tree two stories high with branches that touched the roof. On the day we saw the house, it was in full, purple bloom."

"You fell in love with that tree!" we chorused. Liz, the middle child and observer, looked a little more solemn than usual. Sara would pick this moment to pat Dad on the shoulder to assure him it was all right. She understood.

"I fell in love with that tree," said Mother. "It shaded the back lawn and Mr. Hutchins said it kept the living room cool all day."

"But it left a lot of leaves on the ground that someone had to pick up," said Dad, "and it blocked the view of the bay." He looked a little embarrassed when he said this, but it was a brave act. Mother shot him another look, the one which forced you to retreat, and we said "Daddy! Who cares about the view" in exasperated unison. We knew that Dad would never understand how much Mother loved the tree. The lines of allegiance were quite clear in this instance. But Sara patted

him on the shoulder.

When Mr. Hutchins approached Dad about the house, the moment was right. Had it been a year earlier, they would not have been able to afford it. Had it been a year later, they would have started building on their Ainako lot. Adding to the moment was the fact the house was ideally located—the hill was a good neighborhood. And it was a lovely house, spacious, with a view of the bay, the kind of home you bought and lived in until the kids left home.

Some childhoods are measured in friends, some in occasions. Mine was measured in houses and neighborhoods. Between the time my parents married just before Pearl Harbor and the time they bought the house when I was eight, they had moved six times.

Their first was a converted carriage house on the grounds of an old estate in Puueu. “That’s where I plucked my first turkey,” Mother said. She had heated water on an outside fire in the same tub she boiled sheets in. “I had to lift this twenty-pound bird by the legs and dunk it headfirst into the water to loosen the feathers. I got it in okay, but when I tried to lift it I simply couldn’t. There I was, in *clouds* of steam, hanging on to those legs for dear life. Fortunately, Daddy heard me and between the two of us, each holding a leg, we got it out. Oh, but the *smell!*” Whenever the story of the carriage house was told, we were made to feel grateful that turkeys came plucked and gutted and that we would never have to wash the smell of boiled turkey feathers out of our hair.

I was born while my parents lived in a cottage at the top of Ponahawai Hill. There was always something romantic about the place Mother called “The Kapiolani Cottage.” In our family album are pictures of my parents on a blanket spread on the back lawn, Dad in white slacks and a polo shirt, Mother in long skirt and a peasant blouse. “Sumie took that picture,” Mother said, “she had a crush on your father.” In another photograph Dad, shirtless, poses with a shovel. Beneath it Mother has written, “He never turned a spadeful.” The cottage was special; it signified a time when my parents were beautifully and deeply in love.

When I was three, Grandma and Grampa Freitas moved to the mainland for a year, and we lived in their house in Kukuau. Not too much survives of the period, but there is a photograph of Mother in the swing which Dad hung for me under one of Grampa’s two Madeira orange trees. In the background you can see the edges of Grampa’s neatly trimmed lawn.

Next we moved in with Mother’s parents in Piopio. The house, which sat on the edge of a large pond, was provided by the Japanese school where Grandfather was principal. During the war, when the language schools were closed, Grandfather made a living designing linens for the soldier trade and Grandmother sewed pants for the Army. Times were difficult, which is one reason my parents moved in with them. My sister Liz was born in the Piopio house when I was nearly five.

A year later we moved to a small frame house in Villa Franca, a pleasant neighborhood with lots of children. For the first time in my life I was not con-

stantly supervised by an adult. My companions were children who like me were left to wander within the confines of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea streets. I watched my first pig killed and gutted next door, and although I was horrified when they slashed the animal's throat and let it bleed slowly to death, I still joined the pack of children who converged on the smoking carcass to fight over the scraps of roasted pork. It was at Villa Franca that I witnessed my parents' first real fight. Mother realized that Dad was happy with their life and if there were to be changes in their circumstances, she would have to instigate them.

"I don't know what happened to your father," Mother said to me later, when as adults we could talk about such things without recriminations or embarrassment. "We lived carefully. We saved, but I don't think he realized we were saving for something. He didn't want to think about spending what we had worked for. Strange."

A number of things happened at that time which have bearing on the story. Dad's insurance agency began to do very well and Mother left teaching to help him manage the business. They bought their first new car, a green Pontiac, and they moved again. Sara was born in the house on Laimana Street when I was seven. There is a photograph of the three of us sitting on the front steps. The infant Sara is on my lap, Liz next to me, feet turned in. The three of us are looking squarely into the camera. Our hair is cut in the severe bobs we were to wear throughout elementary school. Sara, of course, is bald. On the doorstep behind us is a pair of heavy legs. They belong to Bernice, the Portuguese woman who would take care of us for the next five years until she married a sergeant she met at an Army canteen.

Liz liked her stories to start at the beginning. Sometimes when Mother began in the middle, or got stuck in the preface, or meandered off, Liz would bring her back to the point. "Start at the beginning," she'd say, "then do the other stuff."

The beginning was the day they saw the house for the first time. Mr. Hutchins, owner of the house and a client of Dad's, had built a new home and was anxious to move. He was asking a modest price for the home he had built and lived in for twenty years. "It was a bargain, but your father didn't feel we were ready," Mother would say, adding, "Of course we were ready."

"We couldn't have been more ready!" we chorused.

"Why didn't you want the house, Daddy?" Liz would ask.

"He just wasn't ready for the big move," said Sara, patting Dad on the shoulder.

"I wasn't ready for the big move," said Dad.

"We couldn't have been *more* ready," said Mother, and she would recount the inadequacies of the Laimana Street home—the list a litany of sorts which we committed to memory. Traffic too heavy. Place too small. Bernice sleeping in basement. Hot. Dreadful.

My Mother's Tree

We knew from Dad that Mr. Hutchins himself drove them to see the house, but it was always through Mother's eyes that we saw the house for the first time: a wide driveway flanked by mock orange, dark poinsettias below the windows, a delicate elderberry blooming near the front door, beyond the garage a covered patio where Mr. Hutchins said his wife loved having lunch. Seven great ceramic pots lined the patio railing, and six wire baskets of staghorn fern hung from the eaves. And there were more blooming elderberries. We knew by heart Mother's feelings even before she saw the tree.

After we moved in, the ceramic pots would be gone, but I would keep my pots of succulents along a narrow shelf fixed to the railing. A redwood table and benches would replace Mrs. Hutchins' dinette, and on Sunday mornings we ate breakfast there after mass. In white terry cloth robe, her thick black hair tied loosely with a red ribbon, Mother moved briskly between kitchen and patio, leaving the smell of Palmolive soap in her wake. She looked happiest on Sunday mornings, her hair free of the severe bun, her face soft and relaxed.

"Tell about when you saw the inside," Liz would say. It was our favorite part.

"Yes!" said Sara. "Tell about the view, Mommy." She waved her arms about. "And the ceiling, how big it was. And don't forget the tree!"

"The tree, Mother," said Liz.

"I said it first," said Sara.

"Well," said Mother, ignoring the commotion. She knew we would quiet down. "Mr. Hutchins took my arm, like this,"—she'd demonstrate on whoever was closest, usually Sara—"then he led me along the cement walk to the front door. Mrs. Hutchins had planted an elderberry next to where I have the Peter Buck ti, and I told him how I liked the arrangement. Then he opened the door and led us inside."

A wide entryway opened into a huge, six-sided room with floor to ceiling windows that looked out over the town and the bay. Mother liked to say we could have gotten the whole Laimana Street house into that living room. Even with the blinds closed she could make out the expansive lines of the room, and the dark redwood beams radiating from the center of the high ceiling. Mr. Hutchins raised the venetian blinds on the center window, saying, "Let's get some light in here."

Mother always stopped the narrative for a moment, and in this pause our imaginations recreated the scene. "It was just like a curtain going up," said Liz.

"It was like a curtain going up," Mother said. The tree made a tremendous impression on her, because when she told Liz and me we would be moving into our own home, and later when the story assumed a life of its own, her description became anchored in the image of the tree as the blinds were raised. An explosion of purple and green, the light behind it, the pattern of leaves like a carpet on the sunny floor.

"Why didn't Grandpa *like* the tree?" asked Liz. It was a question she returned to over the years, even after she realized his personal feelings about trees were

not the issue. We knew he didn't like anything that didn't bear fruit. But after what happened, the tree took on a reality, a personality, it never possessed at the time of the incident. After all, we were all present and did nothing to stop it. The truth does sometimes get out of hand.

"Why didn't Grampa like the tree?" mused Dad. "It wasn't that he didn't *like* the tree," he said, searching for the right words. "Grampa didn't *understand* the tree."

"He didn't understand the hibiscus bushes either," Liz said.

"And he almost cut down the elderberry," added Sara.

"Fortunately," said Mother, "I was able to save that one." But for years she worried she would come home one afternoon and find it cut down.

I think we became collectively uncomfortable at this point in the narrative, Dad especially. But we pressed on in spite of feelings. Sara's patting hand had something to do with it.

"I was busy at the Laimana Street house," said Mother. "Cleaning. Last minute packing. Bernice had her hands full with Sara getting into everything. She said she didn't hear."

Liz and I had been told to help Grampa, who had appointed himself custodian of the grounds, but instead we explored the back yard. The hill was quite steep. A terrace had been cut near the bottom to break the long slope and allow for fruit trees. The abrupt drop from the terrace ended in a grove of bananas. A year later our neighbor's three-year old would self-launch in an enamel tub in which her brother and I quite innocently put her, go skimming down that slope, narrowly missing a concrete cesspool cover and the great trunk of an avocado, and disappear into the bananas at the bottom, unhurt. Much later, after we had moved away, another child in a runaway carriage would not be so lucky in her encounter with the avocado. There on the terrace Mother would start her first garden which was to become the cause of a continuing war with Grampa. The story of this war is another family favorite.

Marking the boundaries on both sides of the house was a hibiscus hedge. The tree grew at the top of the slope, next to the house. Grampa began with one of the hedges, which he cut to the roots. Liz and I were summoned from our play to help tie the branches into bundles for carting away. "Too much rubbish!" said Grampa Freitas, waving his cane knife at the pink blossoms strewn along one side of the lawn. "Too much rubbish!" he said in answer to the protests directed at the immense pile of branches we had to lug down the slope.

"How come you cut the hibiscus?" asked Liz. "They were pretty."

"Pretty!" shouted Grampa. "You want to pick leaves or what?" Pick leaves was what you did with the leaf pick, a gadget Grampa had fashioned out of a broom handle and an ice pick.

We spent an hour dragging the hibiscus hedge down the hill. Preoccupied as we were with finishing we were not aware of the sawing and chopping going on

My Mother's Tree

at the top of the slope. The tremendous crash caught us completely by surprise and brought us scurrying up the hill.

The great trunk of the tree lay on the ground. Strewn about it were branches, chips, bits of bark, leaves, and hundreds of purple flowers. The sight left us speechless for several moments.

Liz was the first to speak. "I'm not carrying that stuff down," she said.

"I'm not carrying that stuff down," I said.

Then I looked up and saw my mother. She had emerged, white-faced, from around the corner of the house.

Had mother been at the house she would have heard the first blow of the ax. But she had spent most of the day at the Laimana Street place. "I had just gotten home. Walked into the kitchen carrying a carton of odds and ends. I put it down on the counter and there was this terrible, terrible noise, a great, long, painful cry that seemed to go on forever. Then that crash. I thought, 'What on earth!' and ran into the living room. For a moment I thought, 'Everything *looks* all right.' But then I knew. It wasn't the same room! The shadows were gone."

Mother shook her head. "The next thing I remember was standing on the back slope looking at what was left of that beautiful tree. Then Daddy came out of nowhere and I said, 'Why did you let him do it?' Poor Daddy."

Once Sara asked, "Didn't you yell at Grampa?" and Mother replied, "I did. When I saw him standing in the midst of that destruction looking as if he should be thanked, I did yell at him. But he was a deaf old man. A stubborn, deaf old man. It would have been like yelling at a mule."

After she came around the corner of the house I watched her pick her way through the branches, carefully, to avoid the flowers. Then she yelled at him. Grampa was six feet tall. Mother barely reached his chest. He weighed over two hundred pounds, she barely a hundred. But she grabbed the ax out of his hands and threw it on the ground. "How *dare* you cut down my tree!" she shouted. She said a few other things too, which really surprised me because she wouldn't even let us say "shut up" to one another. In spite of his deafness, Grampa seemed to get the message. He stood and took it too.

Then Dad was there saying he could hear the commotion from the driveway. He was holding a can of beer and two rakes. Mother was in tears, saying, "Why did you let him *do* this?" and Grampa, seeing Dad, was jarred out of his silence and began to shout, "Rubbish! What's the matter with her, eh? Rubbish!"

"What in the Sam Hill's going on?" said Dad.

"Your father," said Mother, "your *father* cut down my tree."

"By golly, he did," said Dad.

Mother burst into tears again.

"Hey Gramps," said Dad, "Why'd you cut down the tree? How come you don't ask?"

"Rubbish!" said Grampa.

"What do you mean, rubbish?" said Dad.

"What?" shouted Grampa.

"I *said*," said Dad, raising his voice, "I said, what do you mean, rubbish?"

"Who's going to clean, eh?" shouted Grampa.

"Why didn't you stop him?" Mother cried. "Didn't you know? Where *were* you?"

Dad said he'd gone with Steve to pick up lumber at the mill, then to Emma's to get the rakes back. And he had a couple of beers. Before that he had been at Laimana Street. She knew that.

"But what made him think he could do it?" asked Mother. "I don't understand." She looked at the remains of the tree, then turned and walked back to the house.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Grampa.

"Let's get this place cleaned up," said Dad. Then, catching sight of me he said, "Go get your sister."

Dinner was somber that night. Mother kept saying how the room would never be the same, but Dad insisted the view was improved. Now we could see the bay, the town, the canefield, all the way to Puna.

"It won't ever be the same," said Mother.

Somewhere, sometime, in the ensuing weeks, the story took root. It began with the odd reference, the occasional anecdote when someone visited and commented on the neatness of the back lawn or the view of the bay from the living room. "There used to be a tree there," Mother would say, "a giant crepe myrtle." Something in her tone caused people to nod sympathetically, even though they didn't know, or care, what a crepe myrtle looked like. Dad would point out that on clear days you could see all the way to Puna. Sometimes he shook his head and said, "Wasn't Gramps something?" We agreed he certainly was.

Over the years the story grew into a family favorite. It was used to illustrate Grampa Freitas' rather unique character; it also became a moral lesson on beauty and utility. We might be driving somewhere, and Mother would say, "Look at that beautiful tree," and Sara would respond, "Tell us about the tree." And because Patti was launched on her ride down our hill from the stump of the tree, the telling of *that* story often triggered the story of the tree.

We were to live in that home for eight years, until we moved to Honolulu and the house was sold to strangers from the mainland who, as Liz remarked years later, cut down the poinsettias because they bloomed only once a year, the avocado because they didn't know what it was, and Mother's elderberry that had miraculously survived Grampa's ax.

But the story survived, even after we left the hill. Mother and Dad are now retired. They live in a rambling old house in a valley north of the city. The yard is planted with fruit trees: oranges, grapefruit, papaya, guava, mango, and a glorious avocado. Dad spends a good part of his day tending those trees, raking, pruning,

My Mother's Tree
and clipping under Mother's watchful eyes. The harvests are always shared. We
never lack for fruit.

...and Mud Lane shall be known as Piopio

The source of the Wailoa River was a great pond, so large some children called it a lake. But it was a pond and it fed the river, and the river met the sea at the small fishing village of Waiakea. At one time the place must have been one vast bog, but in 1948, white, tin-roofed houses hugged the edge of the pond and dotted the banks of the river down to the sea. The pond sustained this community, and it had not, at that time, lost its original character. On the Kilauea side someone had built a restaurant over the water, and from the balcony you could watch the great turtles rise from the depths of the pond and feed on scraps of food flung to them from the railing. In the late fall the ducks would stop on their way somewhere further south, and the children would throw crumbs to them. You could hear their cries from far away.

My grandparents lived on Piopio Lane, right on the pond. The house was not theirs. It belonged to the Japanese language school that owned the property, and because my grandfather was principal, our family was permitted to live there during the war when the language schools were closed.

That was how I encountered Mr. Naito. He was always Mr. Naito. I don't think anyone ever called him by his first name. He had come to Hilo before they Hawaiianized the street names. He slept in the basement of my grandfather's house and cooked his rice in the shed where he kept his gardening tools. He was a yardman—and one of those who went back.

He is not particularly symbolic, nor is his story. Sometimes I wonder who thinks of Mr. Naito, and if they do, how they remember him. There couldn't have been many people who knew him—my grandfather who employed him, my grandmother who said he was a good man who had an injustice done him. My mother remembers the thimbleberries and the cooking shed; my father says I was always with the old man. Mr. Naito figures largely in my memory of a past time, but perhaps I remember the least of all.

There is a photograph that shows a man in coveralls holding a small fishing net. A wide-brimmed straw hat casts half his face in shadow. You can tell he is not a large man; standing next to him is a child who comes up almost to his

...and Mud Lane shall be known as Piopio shoulders. She is wearing trousers and a jacket with two rows of buttons. There is not much else in the picture, except that in the background you can see Waiakea Pond. The picture was taken in my grandfather's back yard. On the back of the photograph is the date, March, 1948, and the words, "Amy with Mr. Naito." I do not recall anything of the day the photograph was taken, but I know the fishing net he made himself and kept in his shed, and I can still see the straw hat with the wide, frayed brim and the cord that fastened beneath his chin.

On one side of my grandfather's house Mr. Naito kept a vegetable garden, and beyond the well-tended rows of radishes, cabbage, and scallions was a thimbleberry thicket. The berries resemble raspberries but are sweeter. Because of the thorns I only picked the fruit that grew on the edges of the thicket—hard, sour berries eaten long before they were ready. I remember coming home from school and my grandmother saying, "Look in the icebox." On the shelf was a little green bundle tied with marsh grass. When I opened it I found a small handful of the large, deep red berries that grew in the center of the thicket. I sat on the back porch overlooking the pond and ate them. My mother claims this happened regularly, but for me the pattern is lost and only the instance stands out.

Mr. Naito liked oranges and would peel them with a sharp knife, making one long spiral ribbon. There was a song that went with the peeling of the orange, but I have forgotten it.

And again, his hands are peeling scallions for pickling. Layer after layer are removed until the milky white bulb is exposed. Then the hands carefully place each white bulb and its green crown on newspaper. The hands are brown and veined, and the fingernails are cut close to the flesh. Fingertips bend inward at the first joint.

My sister was born in January of 1948. I was five. Everyone was busy; I suppose that is why I was at Janice's house, in the mud, why I was able to acquire one of my grandfather's palette knives. In the midst of our play I struck out with the knife and caught Janice on the brow above her right eye. The blood ran down her face and she screamed and her mother came and shouted something at me and I said I would buy them a present if they wouldn't tell.

I was punished severely. When I went to Mr. Naito's shed he told me to listen and I would hear the ducks calling from across the pond. What on earth had I asked him? We walked down Piopio Lane, and when we reached the street we turned left into the sun and walked along the side of the road until we reached the parking lot of the restaurant. Mr. Naito gave me some bread crusts and I threw them to the ducks. On the way home he bought me a nickel's worth of rock candy.

That's all. We moved to Villa Franca and I didn't see him anymore except when we visited my grandparents. Then in 1951 they moved to Puueo, and I never saw him again. When I asked about him recently, my grandmother said he had returned to Japan with his life savings, but his relatives had spent most of it. That is all she knows, except that it was a shame it had to happen to such a nice

man.

The Ministers

Cancer. I'll say it right out, although I suppose some things are better left unsaid. People are about as eager to have an account of this disease inflicted on them as they are a story about the end of a relationship. I won't apologize for my preoccupation, although there are times I wish I could put it behind me and proceed to new and more original subjects. I was encouraged strongly to do so, and by people whose opinion I value highly and whose support I want desperately. But I am *interested* in the disease, fascinated by its inevitable course, attached because I've seen what it does. I can't yet cross that line where the disease becomes literary, as Susan Sontag does. Her point of view is laudable, considering she writes from a personal experience from which one cannot imagine her being detached.

But this is all beside the point. Because when Ted got cancer, it was all over. Between us, that is. Self examination—that ponderous going over of things done and not done—is like the diagnosis which follows only after the patient is beyond saving. Neither process brings enlightenment in my experience. They come too late. If the disease is discoverable, it has progressed too far.

Cancer is not something you sit around sharing, like bed, board, the electricity bill, your neuroses. In Ted's case, its presence led to a game, a version of king on the hill, which eventually left the players without moves. On the day Ted was in surgery, I wanted what my imagination dictated: ashtrays filled to overflowing, styrofoam coffee cups, dozens of them, stained with the dregs of vending machine coffee, a half-eaten sandwich, magazines unread but well-thumbed, and in the midst of the clutter, me. Dreadful. But being left out in the wings was not something I was ready to cope with.

Littenhelder, Ted's internist, quashed the first script. I wonder how often he played the same scene.

"Shouldn't I be there? Suppose he wakes up, shouldn't I be there when he wakes up?" I was pleading.

He studied me with a look of expertise, the one he wears to read organs and tissue for traces of the aberrant cell. "Why do you want to hang around here?"

he said. "Look, he's going to be in surgery four, maybe five hours. Then they'll move him down to recovery and watch him for a couple of hours. Hey, you look beat. Go on, come back around six—OK?—and call me around three. I'll give you the dope."

So while Ted was having his belly cut open, I gave a lecture on the preposing of adjectives. Later, however, with patient due to be moved out of recovery, I began to make final preparations for the great bedside vigil. Driving to the hospital, I reviewed all my attendant anxieties—a belly sliced neatly open and the intestines bursting out like fat sausages, tomorrow's discussion on relative pronouns, a belly cross-stitched with polite blue X's like some grotesque sampler. What do you say to someone who's just been through such an ordeal. "How do you feel, darling?" As my car careened into the parking lot, my mind moved up the descending colon, turned left, bumped into the thing which had to be cut out, and leapt to the next attendant. Could the subject of marriage be brought up now that I wasn't the one truly suffering?

Ted used to call my emotional outbursts Portuguese opera. Get visibly upset and it was "Here comes the aria." Describe a slight and you were branded "pale martyr." Endearing. Once in his room, I set the stage, prepared my face, rehearsed the scenarios. Tragic. Solemn. Warm. Comforting. Brave. The knock at the door came in the midst of one of my facial contortions. It was the Reverend. Let me stop here and explain about the Reverend, and another point I want to make, which is that not all ministers wear frock coats. The Reverend, a good Unitarian, is "socially involved," ministering on the side to a congregation of two hundred souls. Before Ted's operation, he had been in our home exactly twice, both times to talk about urban inroads on agrarian lifestyles. He was your average ritual liberal, involved, but rather innocuous.

Taken off guard by the intrusion, I was momentarily speechless. So he opened. "Well, it's Amy, isn't it?" he said. Of course he knew who I was, so I said nothing. Undaunted by my silence, he pressed on bravely. "Haven't they brought him down yet?" I looked meaningfully at the empty bed and with no small satisfaction watched him try to decide whether to come in or wait in the hallway. Ministerial intent winning over, he chose the former. With that courageous act, my vigil lay in heaps at my feet.

Perhaps it was the way he was dressed—tan sports jacket, blue trousers, and matching knit sports shirt. Perhaps it was his hair—white benign masses of it—or his height, a portly, but confident, five foot eight. But I wanted him out of there. He walked briskly to a nearby chair and sat down. I gathered what dignity I could muster and pronounced, "Reverend Morton, Ted isn't having any visitors." His answer was to draw his chair closer to mine. "Ted is still in recovery," I said, moving my chair back an inch or two, "and he isn't having any visitors." The Reverend crossed his legs and folded his arms. His chubby pink hands sat comfortably in the crook of his elbows. They were so clean, his hands, his nails too.

Buffed. And his face glowed rosy and expectant, as if he welcomed the next thrust. I relaxed. A mistake.

“Who ordered the no visitors?” he asked gently.

It was so sudden, this tactic, I must have paled. “I did,” I managed.

He thought on that a moment or two, his cheeks glistening pinkly, then countered, “But I thought only the wife or immediate family could make that request.” I had to hand it to the Reverend; he understood that disease highlights the battle of who has the right to minister. I gave in, feeling titleless and rather naked.

“Well,” I said with meek resignation, “why don’t you stay and see him.”

“I intend to,” he determined.

I sat there in a brown study, thinking Ted is dying. Damn him. And damn the Reverend.

There was a commotion at the door and Ted was wheeled in, tubes rattling, bottles clinking. I thought: liver, lungs, brain, breath, mind. Tumors popped like toadstools out of body orifices. Orderlies pulled, lifted, and settled the patient to the snap of taut sheets, the squeak of rubber-soled shoes. In moments we were all choreographed. The curtains round his bed were drawn open, the Reverend was whispering, “Ted, Son, can you hear me?” and Ted was whispering, “Yes.” Then we prayed, led by the Reverend, our hands joined among the tubes and hoses, our words accompanied by the heart monitor. Ted, with his black presbyterian heart, who joked with great glee about small town religion, who came saying “Christ, *Christ!*” in my ear, this new Ted prayed with the Reverend.

That little incident marked the beginning of the long pause, the stretch of time between the fact of disease and my flight. I couldn’t stage things any more. What had carried me through the business of living I couldn’t script. How was I supposed to stop the inevitable? You see, what keeps romance alive is that you do not know. Anything’s possible. Which brings up something else—there is nothing romantic about the cure. I don’t know what chemotherapy feels like, but I had been well coached about what might be expected. Diarrhea, drastic hair loss, tiredness, low libido, bad breath, bad dreams, bad temper, inertia, bleeding gums, loss of appetite, loss of weight, nausea, death. I became obsessed with the image of a bald, tired, diarrhetic shell of a once former lover sinking slowly ever deathward.

Not surprisingly, the Reverend became somewhat a fixture in those first few weeks. I’d come home from work and find him and Ted talking in concerned faces. “Why do you talk to him?” I shouted. “Why do you even let him into the house? He’s a fucking parasite.” Ted shook his head as if I had pained him beyond words and said, “I don’t want to hurt anybody ever again.”

“I’m hurting!” I screamed. Ted answered with one of those meaningful looks that said that *No One* could hurt like he did. I retreated guiltily into the bathroom, screamed silently into the mirror and watched my neck tendons ripple.

I didn’t realize in those crucial weeks that part of ministering is convincing

people of their sins. Ironically, and this will bring up a related point, the Reverend's visits eventually stopped, not because of anything I did or said, but because he wasn't needed anymore. To be useful, ministers need sinners, and Ted had become a saint. "You've become a saint," I said triumphantly, "and what does a saint need of a minister. Right?" He ignored that one. But people began to look to him. When his friend Joe Beach died of a heart attack, Ted drank champagne over the death of a friend and spoke gently and eloquently to Joe's widow over the phone. I heard the part about "death and the middle-aged male" and, not quite believing I had heard right, thought about how scared Joe Beach had been when Ted was in the hospital, how he wrote those nice, shy poems about friendship between men.

Later I wrote a poem which ended:

Had I dared voice the cliché which usually serves,
Had I made motion to second the passing
Of the middle-aged male (my friend too),
Would it have made you less exclusive in grief?
His death less a boy-gang affair?

I knew Ted read it, but he ignored that too, just as he ignored anything that upset the equilibrium of his life. Which brings up another point: cancer makes you one of the elect.

In early summer he announced he was going home to see his family, his mother because "she's getting old," and his ex-wife because "we have some things to talk about." I said, "Are you going to sleep with her?" He gave me his pained look and asked, "What are you trying to do to me?"

"Nothing," I said, "I'm not trying to *do* anything."

At about this time I began to watch him, as a pathologist some specimen, noting every change, every sign of impending change. Part of me knew he was rid of it, knew that what had grown in his bowels was gone, but another part kept looking. And that part couldn't get close to him without feeling slightly sick. His body seemed different somehow—oily, the bones coming through the layers of hard muscle, yet curiously soft in unexpected places, like the neck, the lower back.

One morning I felt him against me, his fingers brushing the tips of my nipples until they grew hard, then moving down my body to my belly, my thighs. I pretended to sleep so he could arouse me slowly while in my mind's eye I watched him unawares. There was nothing else in my world, just Ted's hand stroking and probing. He entered me gently; I opened my eyes as if wakened and looked into his. God. To be lost in that blue was what I wanted. Then I saw the bones of his brow, the indentations beneath his cheeks, the skull pressed against skin.

When he got back in late summer I was convinced his condition had worsened. His color seemed healthy enough, but I thought I could see the yellow-grey signs of a diseased liver lurking beneath the robust surface glow. "You look fine,"

I lied when he led me upstairs.

“So do you,” he said unzipping my jeans, pulling them down about my knees, and lowering me to the bed.

I said “Not that way,” because I didn’t want to look at his face.

“Okay,” he said agreeably, bending me over the edge of the bed and entering me from behind. He never once looked at my face, but in that position, I didn’t have to look at his either. After that our couplings, when they did occur, were furtive gropings in the dark, desperate, impersonal. I began writing my first cancer story about the sexual fantasies of a woman named Dixie who is dying an interminably long and ugly death of cancer of the pancreas. Ted took up tennis again. He played five or six days a week. And with anyone—his stockbroker, his dentist’s wife, with the weekday tennis groupies he wouldn’t have looked at the year before.

“What did you do today, darling?” I’d toss out casually.

“Tennis.”

“Who’d you play with?” I’d volley back.

“Dick,” he’d return. And before I could wonder out loud how long he’d played he would add, “Six sets. Doubles.”

Our level of conversation dropped to the monosyllabic. My written outpouring amounted to a sizeable collection.

Some doctors, eyes to the past, look for the cause of disease. Others, rooted in the present, treat the symptoms. Still others, more interested in the realms of possibility than in the lessons of the past or the experience of the present, address what might or could be. Preventive medicine. I continued to observe, convinced, despite the evidence, that it lay there, the mass of malignant tissue. Beneath skin and flesh, buried within bone or habored in gut, it had indeed caught somewhere. Looking incessantly because I had to know, I found it.

I was making a salad when he burst in, tennis racket in hand, a can of balls under his arm, face flushed. The picture of health. He peeled off his sweaty shirt and his skin glistened. Dewy drops of perspiration burst their little membranes and trickled down his back. Tearing romaine into bite-sized pieces, I watched him open the refrigerator door and reach for the bottle of ice water. As he raised the frosty bottle to his lips I said casually, “You got a letter from Guess Who today. It’s on the desk.” Still holding the water bottle, which had begun to sweat, he started for the desk. “And I opened it,” I sang after him. He turned to face me, his look pained. I decided then and there I hated that look. It was so healthy.

I seized the paring knife. And cut into a tomato. The seeds spurted out of their casings. “She thanked you for the great time. Read the part where she says she wants to come back.” He said nothing, so I hurled it at him again, “She says she wants to come back!” Then, quietly, after a dramatic pause, “Just what did you do this summer?” But he wouldn’t acknowledge. Mumbling something about showers, he disappeared into the bathroom.

A Small Obligation and other stories of Hilo

I stood a long time at the kitchen sink, looking through the window and across the park, gripping the paring knife, which I had stuck into the cutting board as if to keep myself from falling. The cries of children cut through the green like so many razors. With the clarity of those voices I thought about the Reverend Morton, how he ministered to the dying, and I thought about myself, what the disease had come to represent. I wish I could say things fell miraculously into place, that I packed my bags and left, never to return, or that I unstuck the paring knife and cut his healthy throat. Which brings up my last point—it doesn't work that way. We ate the salad, and two months later I left, quietly, and without fanfare.

Recently, I bumped into the Reverend, just looked up over the lettuce and there he was, carefully selecting oranges from a huge pile, benevolent in blue polyester and out of place among the housewives and fresh produce. I walked over and tore off a plastic bag from the roll.

"Hello, Reverend."

He looked up, surprised. "Hello," he said, "it's Amy, isn't it?" It seemed somehow a genuine question. Perhaps it always was.

"Yes, it's Amy."

He studied an orange, then dropped it into a plastic bag. "How's Ted?" he asked casually, "I haven't seen him in a long time."

"I guess he's all right, Reverend. I haven't seen him in a long time either."

"Oh?" he said, stopping an orange in mid-bag.

"I moved out a while back."

"Oh. I see," he said, absently fingering the orange as one would a small ball. He smiled ruefully and shook his head. "Bet he still plays a lot of tennis."

"Yes," I agreed. "Ted's a good player."

The Reverend dropped the orange into the bag. We returned to the task of selection for a moment or two, then, as if on cue, but really quite spontaneously, our eyes met. I grinned. The Reverend grinned back. "You know," he said, "he didn't need me."

"Ted doesn't need any ministers, Reverend. And I guess that's all right."

We parted amicably after I said how glad I was to have seen him and did he usually shop there, and I found myself thinking later that I really was glad to see the Reverend.

Persimmons

“Miho, do you remember the persimmon tree?”

The persimmon tree?”

“The one next to the house.”

“But Mama, that was in Japan. You know I’ve never been there.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“I wasn’t even born then.”

“No?”

“No.”

“You don’t remember when my father hit the bamboo with his umbrella?

And the sound the ice made when it fell? *Shaa!*”

“No, you were just a little girl.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You were just a little girl, Mama.”

A Small Obligation

"You know what she did yesterday?" my mother asks. She puts her coffee cup on the counter. She has been nursing it while she watches me fix myself breakfast in her kitchen amidst the leavings of an earlier meal.

"I can't find the tabasco."

"It's in the icebox, on the door," she says, then asks, "What do you want that for?"

"The eggs."

"Eggs? You put that in eggs?"

My mother finds it extremely difficult to watch idly while someone else works. "Don't you want bacon? There's bacon in the chiller."

I have to be firm. "No," I say. But when I turn around she is standing proprietarily over the eggs, spatula in hand. "Mother," I say in the patronizing tones we acquire in adolescence when speaking to our parents, "I've been cooking eggs for years." I nod toward the dining room and tell her to sit down and drink her coffee. "I'll be out in a minute," I add reassuringly, "then we can talk."

Still she hesitates. "Don't you want some coffee?"

I look at her with ill-disguised exasperation. "I'd love some. Now will you please sit down?"

When I join her with a placemat and my eggs, she has cleared a space for me to eat. My coffee is there, the cream already in it. "Sorry about the mess," she says. She looks about her.

My mother uses the dining room table as a makeshift desk, explaining when we visit that she is going to convert the spare bedroom into a proper office and apologizing for the mess. But the clutter remains: two dictionaries, thick file folders with wooden clothespins protruding from the sides, legal pads filled with her crabbed script, old *New Yorkers* and Dad's *Maryknoll* magazines, a large bottle of aspirin, solicitations from Catholic relief societies, number one pencils, capless Faber-Castell pens, a salt shaker, and her ancient Smith Corona.

"You know what she did?" she asks again.

I offer her toast and immediately regret the distraction.

A Small Obligation

"No, thank you," she says. "I can barely manage half a piece in the morning."

"What did Grandma do this time?"

My mother begins with a great sigh. "She does the strangest things, Amy, the strangest things. In yesterday's paper, you know, her paper, was a picture of some women demonstrating for the Equal Rights Amendment. They were carrying placards, large oval things on poles with 'Support ERA Now' in big block letters. The words just leapt out at you. Graphically very effective. *Anyway*, she'd been studying the picture all morning—you know the way she does—the paper three inches from her face. Totally absorbed."

I remark on how intense Grandma's actions can be. My mother takes a sip of coffee and agrees. "After her nap it was the same thing. I even stopped writing at one point and asked if she wanted some tea or a cookie, she gets so hungry in the afternoon. No, no, she said she was all right. So I asked her again, just to be sure. You know how she refuses out of politeness, then acts as if I've taken the food out of her mouth."

My mother is tapping the edge of the table with the fingers of her right hand. It began some time ago, the tapping. "I hate the obliqueness," she says vehemently. "Anyway," she continues, "it must have been around 4:00, shortly before I planned to prepare dinner. I heard the walker, then her slippers. I always know when she has something she wants to tell me. The *urgency* of those little footsteps. So I stopped working and waited."

"I know," I say, with a straight face, "it takes forever."

"She sat down right where you're sitting. The newspaper—somehow she'd managed to hold on to it—was tightly rolled up. She put it there, right where your mat is, while she made herself comfortable, then slowly and deliberately unrolled it. *Then*, Amy, she proceeded to tell me the most incredible story. It's so *strange* where she gets these things. I ask myself, where do they *come* from?"

Mother's stories often have long prefaces, her telling slipping into familiar cadences. In many ways her stories were the most affectionate connection we had after my sister was born. Long car trips, the hours she spent ironing my father's starched shirts, Friday nights after dinner, family gatherings, all were occasions for telling. When measured against each other, her tales far outweigh our battles. I can forgive her almost everything.

She was born in Hilea, a plantation town that no longer exists. It was located in the foothills of Mauna Loa south of Pahala in the Kau district of the Big Island. She was the second of four children and the only daughter. Following her father's wishes, she became a teacher, but just before the war, in what I believe was a fit of rebellion, she married my father, who is not Japanese. Later, Grandfather's language school was shut down by the authorities after Pearl Harbor, and every month she dutifully handed her paycheck to her parents.

Obligation runs terribly strong in some families. Perhaps it is an individual guilt. Her oldest brother did not have the same energy to fulfill unarticulated

debts. Even as a child hearing the story of the paycheck, I felt it unfair that she and Dad were the ones who had to support her parents during a time when everyone was hard-pressed. After Grandfather's release from the relocation camp, he was able to earn a small living blockprinting Hawaiian designs on shirts, muumuus, and other souvenirs purchased by servicemen stationed in Hilo. Grandma sewed Khaki pants for the Army and taught *shishu*, Japanese embroidery, which was not considered a dangerous art. I loved my grandparents, but \$120 seemed an enormous sum. Would I have to do that one day?

My mother is not looking at me. Her eyes are fixed somewhere above my head, and her right hand is tapping the edge of the table. After a while, she says: "Her hands were black with newsprint. She asked me if I remembered Japan. 'No Mama,' I said, 'I've never been to Japan.' But you know, Amy, she just went on in her schoolmarm voice as if she hadn't heard. She said, 'They are honoring the turtle, these women. See? They are expressing their feeling about the turtle, which in Japan is a sacred and auspicious creature. *Minasai*.'"

Mother's voice has taken on the character of Grandma's. "Look," she mimics, "the turtle shells are painted many colors. They are holding them on poles, and the crowds will bow with respect as they go by."

Mother pauses to clear her throat before continuing. "I said, 'Mama, why don't you *read* it. It's not about turtles, it's not even about Japan.' I didn't tell her the picture was black and white or that the women were Americans and not Japanese. But I did tell her that they weren't marching in honor of the turtle, but in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. 'Sō?' she said, as if I'd presented her with the most surprising news."

My mother's hand is still tapping. She is staring at my chair. "You're thinking it was cruel of me, Amy, to insist, because she knows nothing about such things. But she's *clever*, you know."

"What happened then?" I ask.

"Well, she sat there for a few minutes looking at the picture, and then she said, 'I don't know about *that*' and why didn't I send her to her mother in Japan. She was a burden, but *her* mother would take care of her. 'Mama!' I said, 'your mother has been dead for almost seventy years!' And you know what she said? 'Oh? Is that so?'"

"Do you remember the turtle, Mother?" I ask. Mother looks puzzled. "You know, the one I got for a gift when we lived on Piopio Street."

Her hand stops tapping. "Piopio Street? Oh yes," she says, smiling, "Mr. Naito gave it to you."

"Right."

"You were five. I remember."

It was a tiny creature which fit in the palm of my hand. It looked like a little lacquer jewel box, the shell painted bright red and blue. My grandmother gave me a blue glass bowl. I put water in it, some smooth black pebbles, and carried that

A Small Obligation

bowl around for days, ignoring the warnings that I would drop it and cut myself to bits. After a week I decided the turtle looked unhappy. In a fit of generosity I took it out to the shrimp pond, picked it up by its painted back and let it go. It sank like a stone and disappeared in a puff of silt. Gone. How I searched for that turtle! But I never saw it again. I dreamed about it, imagined it had drowned. Twenty five years later, after my grandparents moved to Honolulu, I told Grandma about the turtle. She thought the story was hilarious, and when I asked her why, she said that after we moved to Villa Franca she had seen it sunning itself on a rock. Yes, of course she knew it was the same one, because the shell still had traces of red and blue lacquer.

* * * * *

We don't mean literally in this family. What you have to do is wait for the underlying meaning. It'll come eventually. Sometimes you can ask directly, but you risk making the person lose face. There's a word for it in Japanese which I don't recall, but I know what it describes. Imagine someone in a kitchen. Pots and pans are being thrown around, drawers slammed. Obviously, someone is angry. Now in the typical American household one would probably go into the kitchen and ask what the matter was. On my father's side, someone would yell, "Eh, shut up!" But not in ours. No, we would know that someone was offended and someone else was responsible, but to ask what the problem was would make the offended party feel they were angry about something not worth your noticing, and they would lose face.

I have always tried to act as if I really knew what had offended. I have had to wait for the proper opening in which to make amends. Eventually the opening will come, but the signal is usually oblique.

My mother and I are sitting on the patio. The wisteria is in bloom, and purple clusters hang from the ceiling beams. My parents have been eating their meals outside, now that Grandma is confined to her room most days. She has been finding it increasingly difficult to walk and complains frequently that her feet are cold, that her back and hips ache.

"I was talking to Ann Conant next door," my mother is saying.

"Oh?" I know that what Mother and Ann Conant have in common is the subject of aging parents. I also know the story. Ann and her husband Ben cared for both their mothers.

"Taking care of two old folks, it must have been terribly difficult," my mother says. The story goes that Ann Conant's mother was the invalid, and every morning they'd have to leave her lunch in a tray by her bed. She couldn't move. If she wanted to go to the bathroom during the day, she had to do it in her diapers. Mother had told me this more than once so I knew she was bothered by it.

"What about Ben's mother, didn't she help?"

“Nope.” The no is emphatic. “She hated Ann’s mother and wouldn’t have anything to do with her. Actually Ben’s mother died first and a few months later, they had Ann’s mother declared indigent and put in a nursing home. It was just too difficult and too expensive.”

I realize I am expected to say something. This is the opening, the story an illustration of something else. I point out to mother how she’s becoming house-bound, that she will *have* to make a decision about Grandma herself, and how difficult that will be, but how necessary, after all she must consider her own health. Mother says nothing while I review the obvious arguments. When I finish there is a long pause.

“*That’s* not the only thing,” she says. “I don’t mind having to bathe her, lift her, scrub her, listen to her. It’s—”

“You know something? Last week I found her in the kitchen trying to reach the telephone. She’d wedged herself between the walker and the counter. Frightened me half to death, I mean that whole thing could have given way. When I asked her what she was doing, she *demand*ed that I tell her Megumi’s number. *Demand*ed. I asked her why she wanted to call him, he never called her. Oh, she said, there was something she had to discuss with him, very important. And then I saw she was holding a postcard, so I asked her what it was. She held it away from me, just like a child being forced to share. It was none of my concern, she said, none of my concern. I must have looked shocked, because she relented and said all right if I *had* to know, she’d gotten an important card from Japan and had to speak to Megumi about making arrangements for the visit. I asked her what visit she was talking about. She said—as if I were the child—that her nephew and his wife were coming. I’m afraid I insisted that she show me the card. Well! Do you know, Amy, it was written over eight years ago? *Eight years!* She’d unearthed it from that pile of old letters and photographs in her room and seized on it for some inexplicable reason.”

Emotions play on mother’s face. Just as I did as a child, I have the strongest urge to protect her. She continues: “I told her that when Hironaka and his wife visited us, *I* made the arrangements, *I* fed them, *I* took them shopping and entertained them. Megumi did nothing but gift us with his presence.”

“He’s impossible—”

“Sometimes I get so angry, I—”

In our family, sentences have a way of petering off. We leave one another with unfinished thoughts while our minds race elsewhere. Here, take this and keep it until I get back. For a while mother and I talk about the wisteria on the other side of the house, the one which doesn’t bloom because the cutting was from the mainland. It takes a seasonal cold snap to jar the plant to flower, my mother says. She won’t cut it down, however.

Before I leave Mother tells me one of Grandma’s General Nogi stories. Grandmother has a keen sense of history—not so much an interest in chronology

A Small Obligation

or in great events playing one upon the next—but a sense of the great personalities of her past, their idiosyncrasies. General Nogi was one of her favorites, a source of many moral lessons. Mother had been cutting Grandma's nails and commenting on how hard they were and how quickly they grew. As she talked she put the parings in an ashtray. Grandma looked critically at her hands and said that Nogi-sama had revered his mother so much he saved her nail parings and hair and kept them until he died.

"I suppose," Mother comments wryly, "this was to suggest that I save *her* parings. Or that I don't possess the proper proportion of respect."

"Don't laugh," I caution her. "It probably was."

"I'm not laughing. You know what else she said?" I shake my head. "Nogi-sama and his wife committed suicide after the Emperor Meiji died."

* * * * *

At ninety-two, my grandmother's world is terribly circumscribed. Bedroom and bath. Patio only once a day. I drop in unexpectedly late one afternoon and find her in her rocker on the back patio. She is staring intently at a spray of orchids a few feet from her chair. Her newspaper lies folded and unread on the floor. She is almost beautiful, softened in the late afternoon light, her little body tucked neatly into the cushions. When she hears me she turns and calls my name as if she hasn't seen me in years. Then she says, "Look. Pretty, no? Grandpa make." She points to the pot. "You give me, this one." I move it closer to her. Very gently, she touches one of the blooms. "I like this one." The patio sits at the base of a terraced hill. Up the cement stairs and around the corner is where Mother found Grandfather, his limbs collected but the back of his head split open where it had struck the concrete. He had been fertilizing orchids. Mother is no longer fond of dendrobiums, but Grandmother still takes pleasure in them.

* * * * *

The telephone wakens me. "Amy? It's Mother. Grandma's had another stroke. I'm calling from the hospital."

My grandmother has given us all a scare, but she will survive this one, the doctor says, although he cautions that cerebral "accidents" of this sort often result in erratic behavior.

So begins a week of nightmares after they bring her home from the hospital. For three nights a fire burns in her room. On the fourth there's snow in the bamboo grove. On the fifth and sixth she cannot find the furo—at 3:30 in the morning—and on the seventh the fire burns again.

"Miho, Miho!" she calls out, waking both my parents.

"What is it, Mama?"

"Come, come," she cries, and when my mother comes, she says, "Look. A fire. There!"

What fire, Mama. There's no fire!"

"*Mite goran!* Look, you foolish girl," she says, pointing to the closet. "Can't you see it?"

According to Mother, Grandma's body was turned around completely, her head where her feet should have been, her kimono half undone, her hair loose and hanging, the pins scattered on the floor. My father thought she was possessed.

"Where is my favorite aunt?" she demanded. "What have you done with her? Did you tell her to go away?" She had managed to pull herself up into a sitting position, and as Mother tried to cover her she cried, "Leave me alone. Where is Shizumi-san? Shizumi! Shizumi! What have they done to you?"

When my mother tried to turn her she snapped, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

My mother is hurt as she relates this. You would think she might take in stride the rantings of an old woman crippled with stroke. But the woman is her mother, still a person who commands a measure of feeling.

"Mother, no one's going to blame you." It is late at night and I really should get home. I long for bed and a junk novel.

"What are you talking about?" she says sharply. She looks at my face and her fingers start tapping the edge of the table. "This place is a mess. I should get all this stuff cleared away into the back room. It's just more than I can handle right now."

I am uncomfortable, as if the clutter on the dining room table represents something I was expected to do but have not done. "Mama," I say, "No one's going to blame you if you put Grandma in a nursing home."

"You girls," she says with conviction, "you girls will get *nothing* from Daddy and me. What little we have will be set aside for our old age. I will *not* allow you to be saddled with the responsibility."

Is it my imagination or is she attacking me? I cannot escape the feeling that I, that we, are being punished for something. But what is it, what is it we are supposed to have done? We are a family of unspoken obligations. I don't know why, but I am stung.

* * * * *

When it came, Grandmother's death was a surprise but not a great tragedy. Shortly after the week of nightmares, Mama walked into the bedroom with breakfast on a tray and found her curled up and quite dead. I was worried about Mama, how she would take the funeral, the trip to Hilo for the memorial services, the adjustment to a life relatively free of the day to day demands of someone who needed her. But she survived the "ordeal," as my sisters and I came to call it.

A Small Obligation

In fact, Grandma's death brought the family closer together. For the first time in years Mama and Megumi were on friendly terms. And I visit more often. She seems to look forward to my company.

In the Buddhist tradition there is a series of memorial services following a person's death. The family repairs to the temple and sits through a special ceremony. Prayers are recited in Japanese. Even Dad lit a joss stick. After the one-month anniversary we had dinner at Mama's. We used the occasion to go through old photograph albums spanning the almost 70 years of Grandma's life in Hawaii. It was close to midnight, when, with everyone gone, Mama and I begin to clear up the "shards of the past"—my sister's expression—scattered on the living room floor.

I am reminded of the task of cleaning Grandmother's room after the funeral and of the dread I felt at what Mama's response might be. After all, Grandfather's death was still not that far in the past. That had been terribly difficult for us all, especially my mother, who felt his death acutely. Anyway, cleaning Grandmother's room turned out to be an occasion for laughter rather than tears. When Mama lifted up the mattress she uncovered a trove of ferreted-away junk: used paper napkins folded into tiny squares, brown candy wrappers, a half-eaten piece of what we thought was dried persimmon, pieces of balled-up kleenex, two handkerchiefs, an old coin purse, a store receipt, nylon stockings, and a not-so-junk twenty dollar bill. After going through her purses we collected a total of \$8.43 in loose change. And the letters! She had saved everything. The photographs filled several boxes, and it was these that received our attention. There were so many.

I pick up a color shot of an old man standing in front of a house and holding what looks to be a book in his hands.

"Isn't this Grandma's brother?" I ask. Saburo lives in Japan and I have met him only once. He was an energetic man, close to eighty at the time, who walked around our house with his socks on.

Mother takes the photograph and looks at it. "Yes, that's Saburo, Grandmother's last living brother. He's about ten years younger than she. Hironaka's father." Grandmother's two other brothers died of tuberculosis during the war.

I point to the book. "What's he holding?"

"Oh, that," says my mother, smiling. "Didn't I ever tell you about the poetess?"

"Grandma's great-grandmother. That's a book of her poems. Megumi took the picture the last time he was in Japan. He described the book as very old, insect-eaten. The family hadn't preserved it."

"You never told me about a poetess. Can I see it again?" The house in the background looks like the farmhouses in a Japanese woodcut. My grandmother was born in that house. Her family had occupied it for generations. "What a shame. What was the book called?" My mother shakes her head. "Damn," I say, "I wish we could make out the script." Saburo looks so formal. I can see the

strong family resemblance, the raised brows, the low hooded eyes. “What do you know about her, Mama?”

“Very little,” my mother replies. “She was a child of promise. *Gan̄ wo kakeru*. *Gan* is a promise; *kakeru*, to obligate. It’s a promise you make to the gods to fulfill a particular obligation if a certain wish is granted. Her parents had waited for a long time for a child. They promised that if they had one, that child would make a pilgrimage to some shrine. *Kami maeri wo shimasu*. That was the obligation. *Kami*, the gods, and *maeri*, to pray. *Shimasu* means to perform.”

“Where was the shrine?”

“Oh I don’t know. Grandma didn’t remember and we never bothered to ask.”

“Did she make her pilgrimage?”

“She tried. She was a well-educated woman, even by today’s standards. Grandma said she wrote many, many songs. Anyway, for one reason or another, it wasn’t until she was an old woman that she decided to make the journey. Apparently her sons tried to dissuade her; it would be a difficult journey, they said. But she was determined to go. So she left with her two servants. Many weeks later the servants returned with a small box containing her nails and hair.”

“She died on the way?” I ask.

“She died on the way,” my mother answers. “She never reached the shrine.”

“*Kami maeri wo shimasu*,” I say quietly. “No wonder—”

“What did you say?” she asks.

“Nothing. But I wish I had known about her before.”

Mama laughs. “Oh Amy, there are so many stories.” She hands me the photograph, which I had laid down. “Here, put this away in that box next to you. The one with ‘Japan’ on it.”

Obituary

"I don't like this place," she said. "It's damp. I feel old here, and I'm *not* old."

"But isn't there anything you can tell me?"

"There's so little to do. So little. And you can't keep books. I know the others steal them."

"I mean from before you came here."

"There's only one thing I remember from before. But it's a long story and he says it keeps changing. I tell him it's the same story, but I think he's tired of hearing it. You see, he doesn't understand the *differences*."