

Diamond Journal

Fall 2001



University of Hawai'i Kapi'olani

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**University of Hawaii Kapi'olani
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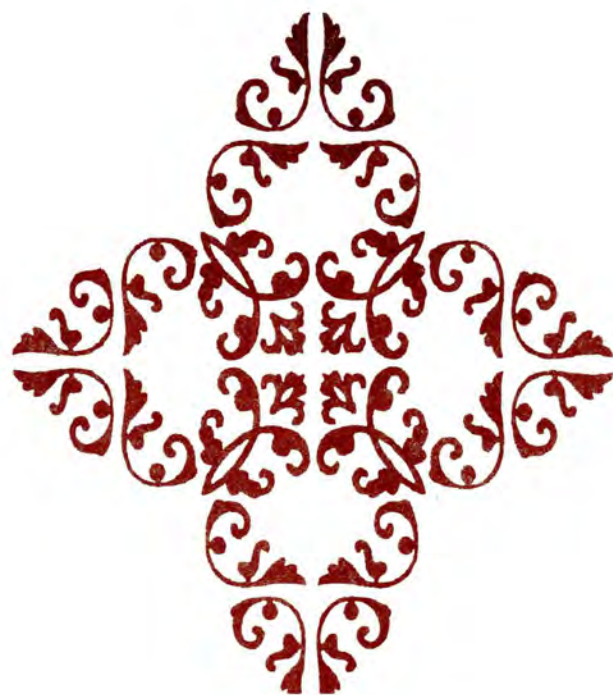
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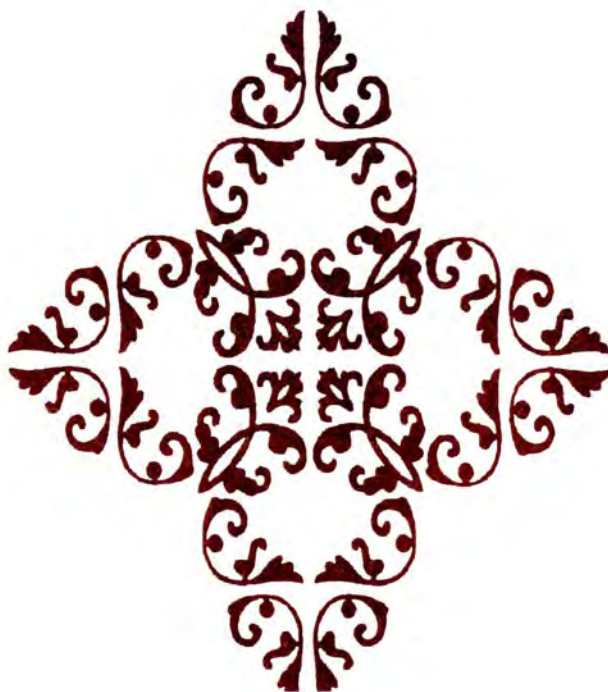
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Step by Step

Today you would think that the movie *Beat Street* is a cheesy movie, but back in the 80's it was the coolest movie ever. The first time I saw it I wanted to be just like the people in the movie, as did my brother and his friends. The movie was interesting because the people breaking were popular at the time, like Rock Steady Crew, New York and Beat Street.

I got interested in breaking when I first saw my brother and his friends doing it. They practiced downstairs in our house doing spins and cool breaking moves. I thought that was really cool. So that's what got me started on breaking. The clothes that breakers wore were a nice style. They wore beanies, Adidas shoes, and Puma outfits that had fat white lines going down the sides. Adidas and Puma were the main brands to wear if you were a breaker.

After a couple years of practicing at the Ala Wai Park I became good at it. With hard practice I achieved my goal that I had when I was a beginner. On my practice days I did my usual routine. I stretched out my body and did my basic warm-up moves, then I improved by practicing a new move that was harder for me.

Our crew S.W.A.T. Team often entered competitions and contests. We once performed at our school, Washington Intermediate, when we were just starting to learn. We weren't really good at the time, but I pulled off some moves to make the crowd happy. Another time, at the club, we almost won the two hundred-dollar prizes, but we came in second place.

The best performance we had was at the St. Louis auditorium. We did synchronized routines where two people went on stage at a time and at the end we all sampled our best moves. The audience really loved it. They stood up and started yelling and making a lot of noise.

We improved a lot by challenging each other. When breaking crews were to battle each other, they challenged to see who was the best. The crew that did the most amazing things won. My stomach always got full of butterflies whenever I was about to go in the circle. Our main rival was UBC, Unstoppable Breaking Crew. We always battled off and on. I must say that we battled each other more than twenty times. They were tough but we won some and we lost some.

When I got to be a senior member of the group I taught young kids how to do moves. I remember teaching this one boy who didn't know how to do anything. Now he's better than I am, so I'm proud of myself for teaching someone to be better than I am.

The moment I realized that I was good was when I knew how to make up my own styles—moves that would make my opponent shrivel in shame and embarrassment. The object of battling is to make the other guy look dumb. I became good in my power moves, which are flares, shoulder rolls, and hand works. I learned how to make my moves fast and smooth. Along the way I made up my own shoulder roll, which I called the one-hand-paddle move. It was a shoulder roll where my arm would swing under my body every time I went around, giving me more momentum to go faster. That's what made it look nice. It looked like a twisted roll that went faster and faster.

But now, five years later, I don't do it anymore, because I have to work and study at the same time. Back then I had all the time in the world to practice. But now I really have to look into studying. So it's like I'm a veteran from a b-boy battle. Learning how to break was a good experience for me. It was a good daily work out and it kept me out of trouble.

Missing My Dad

When I was growing up, I lived with my mother, grandma, grandpa, and my cousin Tanya. My auntie, my mom's sister, was living on Maui at the time, until she got married to my uncle. They had my cousin Ross. When I was young I never really knew my dad. I knew I had a father and I remember that when I was small, he used to take my mom and me cruising. I know three reasons why I never knew my dad and why he never came to see me before he died.

The first reason why I never saw my dad was because my grandma and grandpa disapproved of him. They thought that he was a bum from Papakolea who wouldn't amount to anything. Anytime my dad called the house, my grandma would hang up the phone, so he couldn't talk to my mom.

After my grandpa died, my mom had a nervous breakdown. My grandma didn't know if my dad was going to pay child support, so she decided to say that they didn't know who my father was, so my mom and I could get medical insurance. After that happened my mom continued to go out with my dad, and sometimes she would take me with her. We would go out and eat at Rainbow Drive-In. My grandma would still bother my mom about going out with him, and she would tell my mom to find someone else. Any time my dad's name came up my grandma would always say something mean or nasty about him. Sometimes I think that she wanted to turn me against him because he was not there for me all those years. Actually she was half of the reason he didn't come around. But I never blamed him for not coming around or not calling, I knew it wasn't his fault. I knew he was scared of my grandma (lots of people were) I guess that's why he stopped trying.

The second reason I never saw my dad was because my auntie (my mom's sister) didn't arrange for me to see him. My auntie always had a busy life. But before that, my auntie, my mom and their

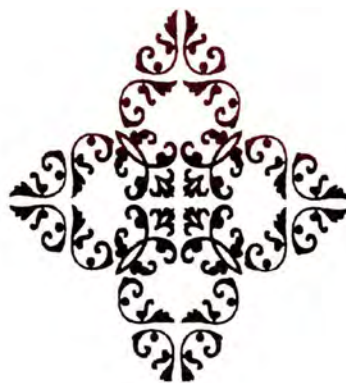
friends always used to hang out with each other, and that's how my mom and dad met. They were all beach bums. My auntie's friends used to see my dad. They would say that my dad would always ask how my mom and I were doing. My dad would ask if my grandma was still alive and he'd tell them how she used to hang up the phone whenever he called. Sometimes I wish my auntie had told me or made arrangements so I could see him. But I know she was scared of my grandma too. My grandma is not a mean person, but she can be a very negative person. I just wish that my auntie could have done something so I could have spent time with my dad.

The last reason I did not see my dad was probably my own fault, because I stopped asking about my dad. After my mom was diagnosed as a schizophrenic, she didn't want to talk about him anymore. After that my mom went to live in a care home because my grandma couldn't take care of her. Once my grandma came home and found my mom on the floor because she had taken an overdose. When I bothered my grandma about my dad she would tell me that he lived in Papakolea, but this didn't help very much. I wish I had done something, like finding his address in the phone book before he died. However, I didn't want to go up to his house and make a fool of myself. I didn't even know if my dad's family knew about me. I just wish things could have changed before he got cancer and died.

In the end I know why my dad never came around to see me. I know the whole story and more. I think that my grandma shouldn't have done what she did. If she had left my mom and dad alone, they would have gotten married. I think my grandma knows that what she did was wrong, and I think she regrets it now. I miss all the years I could have been with my dad. In some ways I think about how I could have changed the situation, but it would have been a hard thing to do.

When my dad died I had mixed feelings. I was mad and sad. My dad was a lifeguard, surfer, and a body boarder who won a lot of competitions. I went to his funeral, not at the church, but to the throwing of his ashes at Point Panic. When my auntie went to the church she saw one of her old friends who used to live next to my dad's old house. The friend asked her where I was. I found out that my dad's family did know about me and that they were trying to find me, but they didn't know my mom's last name.

My Christmas wish this year was to meet my other family. I didn't want anything else but that. My wish came true. Finally, on Christmas day, after twenty years, I met them. I was nervous and excited at the same time. Since then I have met most of my family and I will soon meet the other half. This brought closure to everything I wanted to know about my dad and my family. I'm so grateful that I can spend time with them and they can share memories and stories of my dad with me in the years to come.



Poverty

When I was a little boy, I had already experienced poverty. My mom left me to come to America to seek good fortune for my future. I was only five years old when she left my father and me. It was the most excruciating pain and it was unbearable for me, a little child. I went along to the airport when she left. I cried and cried alone in bed that night. Seeing her look back at me was dreadful. I saw tears running down her cheeks and so I cried also. What seems uncanny was that I felt the hurt that she felt. My mom gave me the short pants that she always wore. I slept with those short pants every night when I went to bed and smelled them just to embrace her aroma, imagining that it was she.

My life started in a town called Guiset Norte San Mannuel Pangasinan, in the Philippines. There were times when we couldn't even eat twice a day. We would hardly have any rice on the table; perhaps there wasn't even any table. There were also times that we would eat only rice with salt and cooking oil. We ate mangos with rice or we sprinkled tomatoes with salt and ate them with rice. My life was so hard and I didn't know it. I thought everything was all right because I had so many cousins to play with.

I used to look at people with food in their hands and pretend that I was eating what they were eating. I used to be so jealous of the other kids my age drinking their soda, eating their crackers and cookies. I will always remember an old lady who used to give me some of the bread that she was selling. If I could see her today, I would say to her that what she gave me was greatly appreciated from the bottom of my heart.

When I look back I know I used to look pitiful, wearing clothes that appeared almost like garbage bags. There was one time when my so-called friend was eating an apple. An apple was a big deal back then. Anyway, I was staring at her apple as if it was

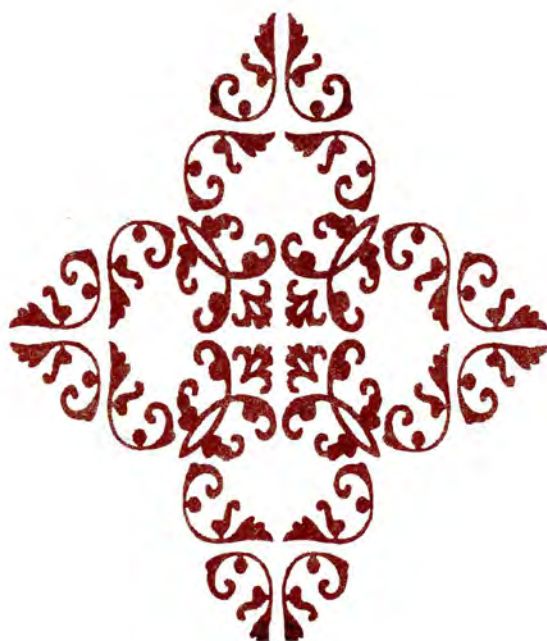
a god. I stared at her and her apple long enough until she gave it to me. What's funny is that the apple she gave me was almost gone as if devoured by a monster. But that day was the most exciting day of my life because I got to eat an apple for the first time. There was a cafeteria at my school and only those with money could buy food there. In my entire four years of staying at that school I only entered the cafeteria three times.

Living in the world without money is traumatic. As I recall it today, I used to go to the mountain with my sister to grab bundles of wood that we needed to make a fire to cook our food. Those bundles were so heavy to carry. It was a long distance from my house to carry that wood, but somehow I managed to get home with it. I used to climb a huge tamarind tree. I would go to the tip of each branch just to get the fruit to sell to my friends. I usually took the dried ones because they taste better. I also used to carry those cashew fruits in my shirt. I remember I never could get rid of the stains on my shirt.

I used to go to the river with my sister, brother and cousins to grab some of the edible snails. But at most places where the snails lived there were also blood-sucking leeches. Going to the river to catch shrimp was the most fun. I always liked going there. There was one time when I lifted a rock that was a little bigger than my head. I saw a long black snake curled up, asleep. I was frightened to death and took off crying, leaving my tiny bucket where the snake was. The main thing was that it didn't hiss or charge at me.

I guess from my past experience I learned that sometimes people have to be brought up this way. Facing such terrible situations strengthens people mentally and emotionally. I believe that because of these experiences I will be better prepared for the challenges to come.

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Me, Myself, Then I: Events to a Second Chance

To explain why I've decided to call this point in time my second chance, I'll have to tell about my past.

From zero to five all I can remember is a blur of bliss. Life is great.

Five to eight, the world is just one big pond of water and I am a sponge. Nothing I feel, do or see, at this time, can prepare me for what trials are to come.

I'm eight. I go to classes—anything and everything—Judo, piano, math. From the time I wake up I have something to learn. School from 8:00am to 2:15pm; math tutoring from Mother, 2:30pm to 3:00pm; piano from 3:15pm to 4:00pm. All my friends from school wait patiently outside, but they all have the same curfew as I do, 5:00p.m. By 4:45pm I've finished all of my chores. Now I guess I'm ready to go outside.

One day in particular I watch as my best friend, Charles, sits and waits for a full hour. He sits inside a plastic tent I built to shelter my bike from the rain. I feel as though my studies go on and on. I have earned the time to go outside and play.

I am twelve as I watch my parents fight and bicker over the smallest issues. My dad is working on Kauai, which leaves my mom sad and lonely. Between her yoga, tennis and other self-help activities she now drinks on a regular basis. She scolds and spansks my brother, sister and me at the drop of a hat. But the fights are what disturb me the most. I remember one night my father coming home to find Mother has opened a bottle of Cold Duck Champagne. He flies into a rage, one I could not understand. He shakes my mom. They yell back and forth. I can hear, but am too afraid to listen. Then he decides to lock her outside. I watch through a window as she lies, crying, on the couch with plastic cushions. Dad tells me I'm not allowed to go to her. An hour

later my auntie from next door comes over. She is outside hugging Mother, questions of "why" flying all around. As a child I see only another argument, now, sister against brother.

At fourteen I look down the hallway to see suitcases, bags and a few boxes. Mother is stacking and gathering them, not much for our fourteen years together as a family. We children watch, huddled together. My sister thinks mother is going to a big slumber party. My brother could always shield himself from his feelings. Me, I see everything through a bleeding heart. My parents walk past each other as if they were on a sidewalk in a big city. It's very cold in the house. I pinch myself to wake up, but dream or not, I watch as Mom gets into a car and then she is gone. Dad pushed Mom away, Mom abandoned me, now whom should I trust?

A full-fledged rebel at sixteen, I stand firm in the shadows against everyone. I hate my mother and use my father's empathy against him. My thoughts are scattered by mind-altering drugs. The good in me is totally subdued. At first, lashing out at both parents gives me hope that they might come together to save me. But I know that this is not going to happen. So I take their petty sayings, "be kind to yourself," "learn and grow," "certain things can't be helped," and mock them, crushing them into dust. I have a recurring dream. In this dream I see a birthday cake with my name on it. I blow on the candles but they will not go out. So I obliterate them with my bare hands. I wake up laughing. No one controls me, I'm invincible within my shield of anger.

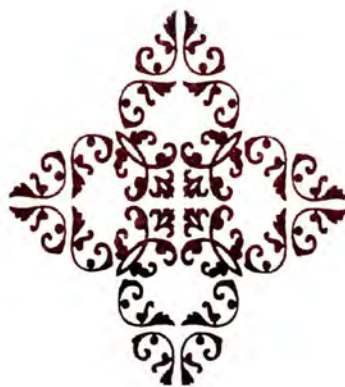
At nineteen things start to turn around. I start to take care of my own bills, and also pay the utility bills at home. I've even fallen in love with one whom I feel is my soul mate. She, I find, has a silent understanding of my anguish, for she has also experienced the pain and torment of the divorce of

her parents early in her life. But that's not why I love her, I just do. Yet my insecurities of anger and fear force me to push her around—question after question, test after test. Trust is something I can't see or feel, so I investigate with a sword of justice. In her subtle way, she tells me that if trust can't go both ways then I also will settle for divorce. My work goes no better. My anger causes me to lose every time. There is no working anything out, the outcome is always the same two words, "I quit". The bitterness inside causes me to say that everyone is to blame but me.

Now, at thirty-one, I'm out of options. My girlfriend and I don't talk as we pass each other on the sidewalk, just like my parents did. My vices, drinking and smoking, don't make me feel happy or dizzy anymore. In fact, with each step I take, I now feel as though I'm heading toward some hidden dungeon, which makes me wonder, "How can I unlock myself from this fate?" A week from this day I lose an-

other short-lived job. I sit down and think, "What have I done? Who can I turn to?" I've lost everything that I loved. I break down and cry, then I listen to my heart, "If you take time to reflect on your mistakes, you can make a new start from here. Don't wait."

This is it, my second chance, back home at thirty-two. I have only one truckload of stuff. Not much to show for my thirty-two years of life. Now that I'm here, I find I have a world of catching up to do. The trust I broke is like a wall between my father and me, and my sister makes empty comments to see if I'm a fake. They both love me though, I can tell, because each time I've set a goal, I've achieved it. They both have a ray of hope that they share with me. Now, with their help and a new appreciation for all the new opportunities that unfold before me, I see a future of new beginnings. I can take the time to look inside myself and set out on the path to my destiny.



Blessings

From the day I was born, I have been blessed with a loving and wonderful family. My entire family is great, yet there has always been one person who has never doubted my judgement despite our good and bad times. My grandfather is a man who lets me make my own mistakes, and believe me, I have learned some very good lifelong lessons. He is intelligent, brave, and puts other people's needs before his own.

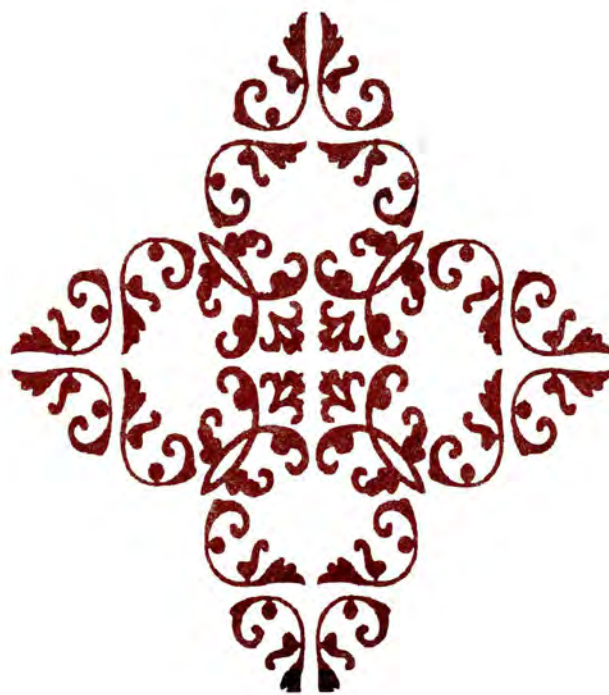
There are so many things that remind me of my grandfather: the smell of light perspiration from working in the garden and the smell of homemade bread right out of the oven. My grandfather doesn't like to drive too much, so he usually catches the bus when he goes places. He takes brisk walks around Kaimuki almost every morning. I'll always remember his saying, "You don't eat, you don't grow." Every morning when I went to my grandparents' house I heard, "You don't eat, you don't grow!" He told me I don't eat enough, and to this day he still tells me that.

My grandfather is always there when I need him. For instance, when I was a senior in high school, I wanted to get my driver's license. However, the testing department was all booked up. The only way I could take the test was to be a walk-in, so on

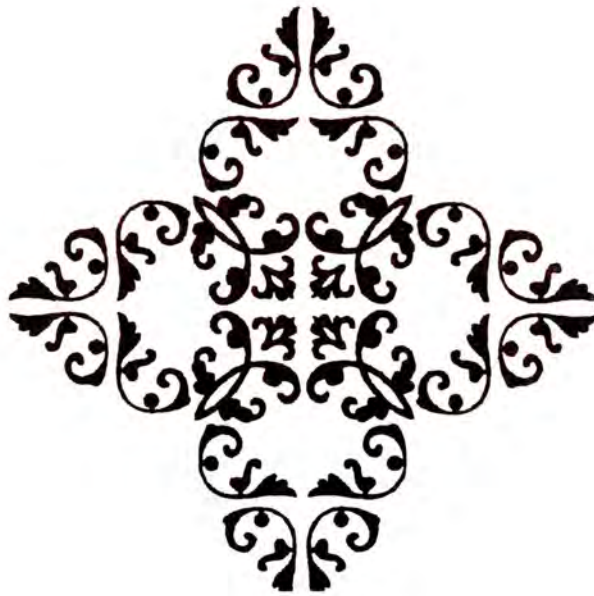
an early Tuesday morning at 3:00 a.m. my grandpa and I drove down to the testing office. We waited in a line at the side of the building until 7:45 a.m. when they finally opened their doors. I tried my best to stay calm, but I got more and more nervous as they came closer to calling my number. Yet, good old Grandpa stayed calm and reassured me that I'd do fine. Look at me now, a licensed driver thanks to my grandpa!

My grandfather has a positive attitude that no one can ever take away. He says that to be healthy in life, I need to keep a positive attitude and take each day one step at a time. He has a positive outlook on life that I hope I will develop as I grow older. I see my grandfather aging and developing some hearing problems, but he's so stubborn he refuses to wear a hearing aid. Sometimes I think he needs to stop being so stubborn, but that's who he is.

My grandfather made me the person I am today. Every year as my grandpa gets older, he also gets wiser. From him, I learned that I can be a bigger person when I help others before I help myself. I also learned to be kind, caring, and most of all to count my blessings, because I know I'm blessed to have my grandpa in my life, and I'll have him in my heart forever.



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The End of an Era

My last big Halloween party was the last night I spent with my two best friends, in the same place at the same time. The party was held at my big brother Bret's house, on the hill overlooking our small hometown, Roseburg, OR. This night was the end of an era. The next day my friend Brent moved to California. Soon after, Kenny moved to Eugene with his future wife and his new baby boy. I then headed off to Hawaii to try to see as much of the world as I could. But that night was full of fun, freedom, and good friends.

The moon was almost full and glowing wildly through the night clouds. Even though it was cold outside all the doors were wide open. The blend of sweat and the breath of excited youth inside the house left the walls covered with moisture. The house was alive. The smell of sweat, keg beer, and cigarettes mixed into the perfect party incense.

The front room was now a dance floor, and the doors were screaming songs of sex and anarchy. The back porch, overlooking the valley lights, was now the day-glow chess room where everyone was painted in fluorescent, acrylic body paint. Each chess piece was glowing from the paint running off of the players' hands, slowly melting, as strange laughter filled the air. There is such a wonderful freedom being in costume, as if all of our sins from the night will vanish with the shedding of the fake skin. The porch windows opened to an amazing view of our little city with all of its twinkling lights. Dancing trees in the backyard were like giants swaying in the wind, protecting our event from the outside world. Swirling clouds and the shaking trees outside were mimicking the freaks in the house. Then the grapes appeared.

A huge purple bunch of grapes entered the candlelit porch; even the jack-o-lantern was shocked to see this life-size fruit squeeze through the open door. A large stem with leaves stuck out at the top.

When the grapes began to dance with their tiny little arms sticking out, and no head to be seen, we knew the party had started. Candlelight, a flashing strobe, and LSD can really bring dancing grapes to life. No one knew who she was, all we knew was that we were amazed! Everyone else's costumes paled in comparison—this was real. Soon, even the glow people had given up chasing ponies, soldiers, priests, and royalty to come and dance with the marvelous grapes.

Kenny had begun to dance closer to the writhing grapes. Now Kenny is 5'4" and stalky like a midget wrestler. He danced wildly like a possessed demon, jumping, flailing, and thrusting his crotch at women. Many nights out, Brent and I had to jump into a fight on the dance floor, between Kenny and a jealous, drunken boyfriend. One man even pulled a knife on Kenny in the parking lot of "The Lariat" and Brent and I had to jump in and rescue him. Meanwhile, the bartender called the cops. So we all went to jail for our little maniac. But for some reason, women seem to have an animal attraction to him. Maybe it was the long curly hair, and crazy brown eyes, but there was something about him.

"What the hell is Kenny doing!" asked Brent. Whereas Kenny was our chaos, Brent was our calm. He was levelheaded, even-tempered, and always wore a smile. Brent observed Kenny dancing, "He looks like a puppy in heat, trying to hump the closest thing to him." He was also a bit of a "wise ass"! "Kenny does what Kenny wants," I replied. "Nothing new for Kenny." Brent and I started laughing, watching him dance his drunken libido dance, slowly getting closer and closer to his prey. To smash those grapes into homemade wine, he would stop at nothing. Now the grape costume was not easy to get close to; there must have been thirty balloons tied and taped together to create the illusion. Meanwhile the person in the grape costume was paying

no attention to Kenny and this was just making him try even harder. "You know Brent, we're going to miss you when you're gone. Things just won't be the same," I said through the laughter. "We'll still see each other. California isn't far away. And you know we'll always be brothers. That will never change. We're like the Three Musketeers, all for one and one for all!"

He was right about always being like family. The few times I've seen him it's like we were just hanging out yesterday. But when the three of us scattered in the wind, we were never blown in the same direction at the same time again. "Let's save Kenny some embarrassment and see if he wants to go take some bong hits, he's killing me out there," I said as I pointed to Kenny jumping in the air and doing his "David Lee Roth" kick. Brent slowly danced in his laid-back style through the living room and was greeted with a flailing foot. The foot, of course, belonged to Kenny. "Let's go upstairs and take a smoke break," Brent yelled into Kenny's ear. "Bart has the pot and you know the saying, the best weed, is free weed." Kenny stopped in his tracks. This, even more than art, was our strongest bond. We loved marijuana. Kenny bounced across the room as Brent slid through the crowd. It was time for our last real session together. It was already 3:00 in the morning. Time has a way of passing quickly when one is on acid. Brent had to be on a bus at 7:00a.m., so we were just going to stay up with him until we dumped his hung-over ass off at the bus station. It

was over twenty hours to Riverside, California, so Brent wanted to just sleep most of the ride.

"Kenny, what are we going to do when this dick-head leaves?" I asked as we climbed the stairs.

"Probably get laid more since he is always showing up at the wrong time and interrupting." Kenny smiled, "I think that girl in the grape costume was hot for me."

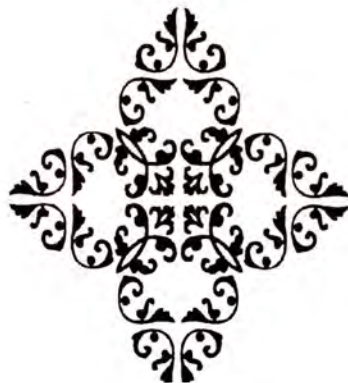
Simultaneously Brent and I cracked up in his face. "From what we saw, you were going down."

"Smoke and flames," I interjected.

"Definitely smoking," Brent finished his thought, smiling from ear to ear.

As the music played and the party raged downstairs, the three of us sat down in the band room one last time. We smoked and discussed our plans to take over the world with art. There was no stopping the dreams of our youth. As the sun was rising, causing the sky to explode with pink, orange, yellow, and scarlet, we laughed together. But it was strange, uncomfortable group laughter. A group full of happiness for each other's dreams, sorrow for the emptiness that we can feel is coming, and fear that we might all fail. Being a non-conformist is not an easy task.

As Kenny and I watched Brent leave on that bus, we couldn't speak. When we turned and looked at each other, our eyes already reflected the beginning of the emptiness to come.



A New Appreciation

Warm, salty tears began to rush down my face. I tried to hold them back, but they persisted. My dad had just told me that my mom had to go to the hospital again for more tests. To calm me, my parents told me that they were sure it was nothing serious, but the fear I found in their eyes told me otherwise.

Last summer my mom's vision went blurry all of a sudden. She went to the eye doctor who prescribed new reading glasses, but that didn't work. She finally decided to go see my grandpa who is a doctor. He determined that the reason her vision was poor had something to do with swelling in her brain. He couldn't determine exactly what from, so he recommended that she go see a specialist.

When my parents told me what the deal was I thought the worst. Was it a brain tumor? An aneurysm? For some reason the doctors couldn't figure it out. I felt frightened and useless. Before this, my mother and I had never had the greatest relationship. We would scream at the top of our lungs at each other and push each other's buttons for reasons that escape me. Remorse consumed my body. I would think to myself that my mom could be dying, and all I could do was feel guilty and cry.

So, it was back to Straub Hospital for more tests. This time she had to stay in the hospital for an entire week. I felt obligated to go with her and be there for her to make up for all of those times that I hurt her feelings and yelled at her.

I arrived on Oahu the day after my parents did, so my mom had already checked into the hospital. I went to see her right away. I can still remember her room number and floor—fourth floor, room 409. From the second I entered the hospital, I became nauseous from the overwhelming smell of antiseptic. I waited nervously for the elevator and eventually made it to her floor. Her door was shut and I waited there, motionless in front of it, apprehensive of the

sight I was about to encounter. My arm felt heavy and unwilling as I lifted it up to knock on the door. "Come in," my father's deep, strong voice proclaimed as I entered the room. I could tell they were both trying hard to look hopeful for my sake, but I could see right through it. My dad looked worried. His normally clean-shaven face had grown a scruffy gray beard. His bright green eyes had become dull and black circles were apparent. My mom actually looked better than my dad, but she still didn't look good. I attempted to keep my composure, but the sight of my mother hooked up to all of those machines made me shudder. All of the tubes and wires enveloping her body suggested a spider web in which she was the entrapped prey. I could see the long, sharp intravenous needle that pierced her skin and I could see the tube pumping anonymous clear liquid through her veins. I sat there and talked to her for hours about life, love, and everything in between. I had never felt that close to my mother before. I was astonished by how strong she was and wondered if I would be equally as strong in the same situation.

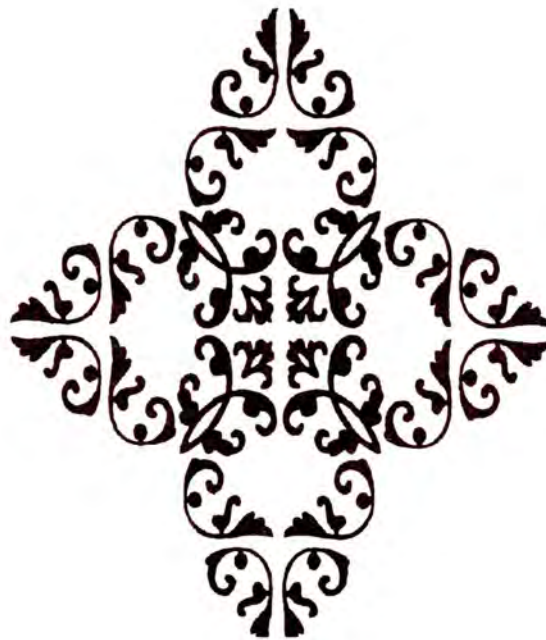
The week gradually went by and the doctors finally came to a consensus about her ailment. They told us that she had multiple sclerosis. There is no cure, and no means of predicting what it might manifest itself into next. Her condition at this point is mild; none of the typical symptoms of this disease have taken hold, so we are hoping that they never will.

My mom is doing really well, but the experience has changed her and my entire family. We all feel that every moment in life is a precious gift and should not be taken for granted. The relationship between my mother and me has changed dramatically. We appreciate each other more and no longer dwell on the little things.

When something deeply disturbing happens to a

family member, life takes on a new perspective. I also developed a profound respect for death through this experience. People in general do not really contemplate "the end" until they realize it is closer

than they thought. I have realized this at a young age, and I am very appreciative for the way that realization has changed the way I look at every second of every minute of every hour of every day.



First Steps

Wow! Five long years have passed, but I can clearly remember playing the guitar for the very first time, as if it were just yesterday. The feel of the rusty strings, the dust that gave it that sense of age, and the smell that words can't clearly describe—that old guitar smell. It sure does bring back memories.

1995. Playing the guitar was my dream. I had already learned to play the ukulele and had been playing for about half a year. I always felt that playing the guitar was the next step in music because I viewed the guitar as a giant ukulele with a couple more strings.

Early in my 8th grade year, I found out that my uncle had played in a rock band when he was younger, and he still had a guitar. I immediately asked him if I could borrow the guitar to find out if I liked playing enough to go out and buy one for myself. And that's when it all started.

I talked to my uncle over the phone and he gladly agreed to lend me his guitar. He told me that he would drop it off at my place as soon as he had the time to swing by. So, day after day, I rushed home from school in hopes of finding that guitar waiting for me, and day after day I grew more and more anxious. And then one day, there it was!

I stood over the guitar case in shock, not knowing what to do. I just couldn't believe it. As I stood there, I scanned the old, faded brown guitar case. It was decorated with dust and spider webs, and the frayed edges gave it a feel of value. At that moment I knew that this guitar was definitely worth more than I could imagine.

When I finally reached out to the guitar case, I

tugged frantically at the semi-rusted latches. I couldn't wait another second to have this guitar in my hands. Rust showed that the guitar must have been shoved away into storage for a while and I'd be the first to play it in years. When I finally had the guitar in my hands, I realized that I had no idea what I was supposed to do with it. I plucked the strings and tried to familiarize myself with the guitar and when I got tired of that, I decided that I wanted to take some lessons from Kurt Cobain of the band, Nirvana. So I popped in my Nirvana CD, hit "play" and listened to the track "Come as You Are".

After listening to the track once, I grabbed the guitar and started the track over. At the time I was worried that the guitar was out of tune and that I wouldn't be able to learn a song from the CD just because I didn't know how to tune a guitar. But luckily, the top two strings were in tune and as the track started playing, I plucked the top string on the guitar and almost flipped out because the note I had played matched the note on the CD perfectly!

I played the same note as Kurt Cobain! Now that I think about it, that's probably the first note every guitarist plays. But at the time, I felt that I had accomplished something amazing. Since I had learned to play the ukulele by ear, I used the same techniques to learn how to play the guitar. Basically, I would listen for a note on the CD and try to match it on my guitar. After listening to the track a few times through, I learned my first song on the guitar.

Ever since I took that first step into the world of guitar, I've constantly been moving forward in my musical career.

Burning Secret

During the winter of 1st grade, after Christmas break, the Annual Meeting for the sale of Girl Scout cookies was held at Summer Gandoli's house. The temperature in Seattle that year was colder than usual and I could see my breath in the air. We were all surprised by a day without rain. Living in Seattle, we were accustomed to the constant rain. When we gathered at Summer's house that evening, none of us had any idea about the events that would take place. Little did we know that what started as a routine meeting about Thin Mints would end up with a chaotic scramble out of a raging inferno. At six years old, I shared a secret with Summer without exchanging words. Deciding not to tell on her for setting her house on fire weighed heavily on me for years to come.

To everyone's dread, it was Summer's turn to host the meeting at her house. We hated to go to her house because we were all afraid of her dad. He was a police officer who yelled every word he spoke as though he was hard of hearing. I don't know if it was the uniform or the perpetual look of anger on his face, but he terrified me. His presence alone was enough to put people on guard. The Girl Scout moms must have agreed with me because they always seemed to show up early to take their kids home when Summer hosted the meeting.

At this particular meeting, I was relatively new to the troop. Being a shy, timid girl, I hovered near the corner by the fireplace. The cold outside was creeping in through the walls of the basement family room, so a fire had been built in the fireplace and many candles were lit around the room to warm us up. Standing nervous and bored in that back corner, my view of the room allowed me to see everything.

As the meeting progressed, Summer's mom, Barb, began telling us how to sell the cookies. All of the other little girls were just as distracted as I was by

her screeching voice and were not paying attention to what she was saying. We were eyeing the plate of cookies and the punch bowl full of Fruit Punch Kool-Aid when suddenly, we heard the front door slam shut and the booming voice of Summer's dad, Rick, yell, "Are those kids still here?"

All of us were startled, but none more than Summer. She was frozen and fear was written all over her face. Summer's mom was scrambling to meet Rick at the stairs so he wouldn't come in and ruin the meeting. It was too late. He came thundering into the basement, showing his displeasure at having a house full of kids. Summer's mom was trying to pacify Rick, but to no avail. She tried to calm him down, but he decided to turn his rage on Summer. He seemed to be overly angry with her for a reason I couldn't quite figure out. Summer was more nervous around him than a little girl should be around her dad. I thought this was strange. Just as Rick started toward her, Barb grabbed his arm and his eyes followed her horrified gaze.

In a terror-filled second, Summer had backed up in fear and knocked over a candle. As in a movie, the candle fell in slow motion. I thought I heard a "poof" sound immediately after the candle hit the floor. Everyone in the room had their eyes on Rick and Barb, except Summer and me. We had our eyes on each other. Immediately, her eyes left mine to turn and look at where the candle had landed. Looking back at me with fear and surprise, her panic turned to sheer terror. Her eyes pleaded with me not to tell. I pretended that I had not seen anything. She pretended that she had not done anything.

The fire spread faster than I expected. Within split seconds, brilliant colors of yellow, red, and orange shot up the wall. The velvet Elvis picture began to melt. As the fire climbed the wall, big clouds of smoke filled the room. The air became

thick and my nose, throat, and lungs started to bum. I was scared and instinctively started toward the stairs.

The room was full of people screaming and crying. A disorganized whirl of madness was heading for the stairs. I saw a blur of brown uniforms spinning around like tops. The shrill scream of Summer's mom came through the smoke in a gurgling staccato as she realized that the fire was out of control. Rick and Barb immediately ushered us up the stairs and out the door. Miraculously, we all made it up the stairs.

Finally, we were all outside on the lawn in front of the house. We had left our coats in the house and we were getting colder by the minute. The ground was frozen and crackling in the heat. Our mothers showed up and started shouting the names of their kids. My mom, Charley, found me and asked me if I was all right. I nodded, "yes," but I never removed my gaze from the burning house. Some of the kids were crying and others were just stunned.

Rick ordered Barb to call the fire department. "Don't just stand there while my house burns down!" he demanded. She didn't want to go back into the house, but she did want to get her dog. We could hear the dog barking so we knew he was in there. They continued to argue about it while the house was burning. We saw the windows burst and felt the heat shoot out from the house. The crackling, bursting windows sounded like a great big campfire upon which dry leaves had just been dumped. Black clouds of smoke were billowing out of the holes that used to be windows. We covered our noses and mouths to avoid the pungent smell.

We heard the sirens wailing and saw the yellow fire engine trucks curl around the corner and come barreling down the hill. One of the moms guessed that a neighbor had called the fire department. The firemen bolted off the truck. Their yellow coats and pants along with their black boots and hard hats looked like bumble bees fluttering about. They seemed to have a quiet understanding of who was to do what. One of the firemen gathered everyone up and escorted us to the neighbor's yard. The other

firemen pointed their hoses on the house and doused it with gushing water. The wind caught the water and the spray teased us. An older fireman ran into the house and, in a flash, came out with the dog.

Summer's dad ran around yelling at everyone while her mom pampered the white mangy dog that was now charcoal gray. It was shivering as much as we were, but not as much as Summer. My mom noticed that she stood alone, shaking, so she brought Summer over to me, and we shared my mom's coat. My mom stood behind us with one arm around each of us. "Just stay with me, girls" she said, comforting us. Inside that coat, I felt her shaking body jostling me.

The police showed up and started asking questions. One of them came over to where my mom, Summer and I were standing, and asked, "Do you know how the fire started?" He looked directly at me, and I knew the question was all mine. I was trying to decide how to answer him, when my mom told him that we had all been through enough, that I was cold and she was taking me home. Not having to answer that question gave me great relief. Eventually the scene calmed down a bit and the moms took their kids home.

As my mom and I were leaving, Rick stood in his yard, in front of the carcass of his house, and asked aloud to no one in particular, "What started the fire?" Summer and I looked at each other and said nothing. The firemen concluded that a candle had started the fire.

Summer never told anyone how the fire had started. In fact, she and I never talked about what happened. We shared that secret. I quit Girl Scouts that year, but we remained close friends. More than twenty years later she confided in me about the abuse she suffered from her dad. I knew then that I had made the right decision. Telling on her would have been the worst thing I could have done. Even though I struggled with the decision for years, I realized it was the best one for the situation. Sometimes right and wrong is not black and white but more of a charcoal gray.

The Shark Encounter

It all started at the age of thirteen, when my friend Jonah and I decided to start a hobby called spear fishing. Spear fishing requires knowledge of scuba diving or snorkeling. Equipment such as fins, a snorkel, mask, wet suit, weight belt and a floater with a flag on it are required. People use spears with a rubber sling at the end and others use spear guns. A stringer to string the fish is also very useful. I already had a spear, or as the Hawaiians called it, a "Hawaiian sling". My friend went to the store with his mom and bought one for himself. It cost around ten dollars for a reasonable one. "The spear doesn't matter," a wise man once said to me, "the one who uses the spear matters." So we both had cheap spears. We decided to go right outside of the Hilton Hawaiian Village.

While diving in shallow waters near the shore, we met an old man named Boe. Boe had a whole lot of fish on his stringer, which was connected to the floater, and to his floater there was a spear gun, held by a tag line, or some type of rope. My friend and I were so amazed at all the fish he caught, that we asked Boe if he could show us where all of the fish were. So Boe took us out past the breakers and my friend and I were overwhelmed to see so many fish. Gradually, we got to know all of the fish's names and which types of fish were good to eat. Finding the fish was easy, but catching them was hard. The fish were so fast that if we even looked at them, they would swim away.

At age fifteen, we picked up really good wooden spear guns and as time went by, we got better and better. We used to catch a big fish every time we went out. Coming in from our dive, we also managed to catch a good size *taco* or octopus, which tasted very good steamed in beer and made *poke* style.

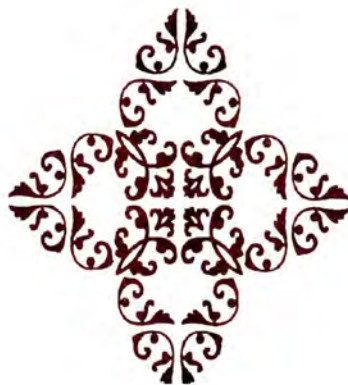
One cloudy, rainy day, my friend and I decided to go diving because the water was really clear. The

only bad thing was that the water was freezing cold. We put on all of our gear. On the right side of the beach is a wall that goes out into the ocean, so we walked on top of the wall and jumped off at the end. My friend and I started to head out towards the deep side of the ocean. We couldn't believe how clear the water was and how many fish were swimming around. We managed to fill our stringer full of fish, but we were greedy and wanted more. After swimming for about three hours, passing the sail boats, my friend managed to find a small shipwreck that had a hole in it. We could see many big fish swimming in and out of this hole. I told my friend to dive down and look in the hole, and he did. He swam back up and gave me the thumbs up to go down and shoot something. I took a couple of deep breaths and made my way down. The water was about twenty feet deep and the hole was all the way at the bottom. I had weights on so going down was a breeze for me. I finally reached the bottom of the ocean and slowly crawled towards the hole. I looked in the dark hole and out of nowhere, a large *ulua* or Amber Jack skimmed the side of my body. I aimed my gun and shot as fast as I could, before it got away. POW! Right into the tail of this masculine fish. I held my gun as tightly as I could so the fish wouldn't get away. The fish finally gave up and I felt like jumping for joy. "Wow!" I said to myself, "My first big fish." All I could think of was getting that fish on my stringer as soon as possible.

As I turned and looked at my friend, I noticed that he wore an expression of panic. At first I thought he was excited and happy that I had caught this fish, but suddenly I felt the presence of something behind me. I immediately turned around, encountering a huge shark. It crept slowly out of the hole, passing my right shoulder. I just froze and prayed that it wouldn't bite me. The shark circled me while I went up for air. It was about eight feet long and I knew it could eat me alive. I just wanted to be some-

where else at that moment. The large shark suddenly made an attack at the Amber Jack I had speared. With one bite, he took off half of its body, which left me only the tail with my spear inside it. Then the shark made a pass at my friend, coming nearly two inches from him, but it didn't attack. I looked at my friend and gave him the signal to dig out. We swam away as quickly as we could, dragging our floaters with us, paying no attention to the shark. While I was dragging my floater to shore, suddenly the floater was dragging me instead. It was almost as if I was fishing and the shark took my bait. It must have tugged me back about five feet, but the tension released and I swam into shore. While pulling in my gun, the shaft was bent in half and the Amber Jack was gone, leaving only a scale.

At that moment in my life, I thought about how my life was so precious and that I wouldn't want it to end anytime soon. In a way, experiencing this encounter changed my whole life and shaped my personality. I always say to myself, "What if I die tomorrow?" From that day on, I have been trying to make the best of my life by being really nice and kind to everyone. This results in avoiding any kind of conflict or doing anything stupid. I try to let troubles pass me by like the wind in my face. I can't afford to waste anymore time in my life getting into negative situations. I try to make the best of my free time by doing things I will remember for the rest of my life. I never spend my time at home watching television or just sitting around the house—not anymore.



My Big Brother

My big brother doesn't wear a red cape and black mask, nor does he have a big "S" on his shirt. He is approximately five feet, eight inches tall. However, in my eyes he stands ten feet tall. He has been available to me for as long as I can remember. My big brother has chocolate brown eyes, dark brown hair that swirls over his left eyebrow and a long and slender face. Usually, at any time of the day, one will see a ten o'clock shadow covering his jaws and chin. When he laughs, it is contagious to everyone around him. He has many sides to him. He is funny, cautious, loving, tender-hearted, serious, brave and daring. My big brother's name is Mike.

From the time I was six until I turned thirteen years old, Mike would ask my sisters and me to race him around our house. He would say, "If you win, I'll buy you a doughnut!" So we raced him and we almost always won the race. The funny thing, though, was that he never did buy us a doughnut. We were always more interested in racing him and spending time with him and my older sister Marla than we were in eating a doughnut. We were sure, each time we raced, that we could beat him.

We lived in a house on Main Street in Juneau, Alaska for a long time. It was on a very steep hill that had a long series of tiny steps we had to climb. Because the stairs were covered with a thin sheet of ice during the cold and windy winter months, we slid down the stairs to reach the bottom. Each day after school, we would dig the cleats on the bottom of our winter boots into the frozen stairs that just a few months earlier we had run up and down. Once we made it to the top, we had to climb another set of fifteen stairs and then walk down a short pathway to our front door. Back then nobody locked their front doors because it was extremely safe and no one ever broke into someone else's house. We never carried a key with us as the door was always un-

locked, even while we slept! In front of our house was a small, grassy yard raised up above the sidewalk.

We would go out often on warm summer evenings and sit on the overhang. Sometimes we would watch people walk by and other times we would watch our friends playing in the streets. In Alaska during the summer months, the sun doesn't go down until very late, sometimes not until well after ten o'clock at night. At this time, we owned a Collie named Lady who was born on Valentine's Day. She was very beautiful and very gentle with all of us. Mike would take Lady outside on the overhang and brush her fur until it glistened. As the tourists strolled by our house on their way to the park at the top of the hill, he would announce to them that we owned "Lassie." Oddly enough, the tourists usually fell for it! One day Mike decided he wanted to make some money. I suppose he figured if the tourists really believed that our dog was "Lassie", he could make some extra cash. So he took Lady downtown and began to tell the tourists that we owned "Lassie." Most of the tourists came and looked at her closely and were persuaded that this was indeed the famous "Lassie." They fell for Mike's story hook, line and sinker. Mike soon convinced them to take a picture with "Lassie" and charged them \$5.00 which they believed to be a real bargain. Of course, when our parents heard about it, they put an immediate stop to it.

Mike could be quite the comic. Whenever my sisters and I had a slumber party, he and his friends would sneak into our room while we were watching a scary movie and they would crawl under the bed we were sitting on. At a really scary part, they would push up on the bottom of the mattress with their feet until all of us were screaming hysterically.

Mike was also tender-hearted. He would take us out to small fields and yards and sit with us while

he taught us how to search for the elusive four-leaf clover. We spent what seemed like an eternity looking carefully for our treasures. Sometimes, after we searched for hours with no results and with tears stinging our eyes, Mike would sneak over to one area and find a five-leaf clover, pull one leaf out, and present each of us with his lucky find. We would then walk cheerfully home with our much-loved treasure.

A few years later, we moved to another house on Mountain Avenue. This house was the last one on a dead-end street. To our left were some neighbors and to our right was a huge forest. Loggers came to cut down trees soon after we moved there, so we called the area the Logging Camp. There were many wild animals in that part of the forest and we frequently saw tracks from foxes, deer and bears close to our home. We even saw a fox come out from the wooded area one day. One afternoon Mike took my parents' .350 Magnum to shoot at empty cans in the forest. My sister, Denise, and I walked up to see what he was doing and he decided it was time for us to have some shooting practice. I remember how scared I was when I sat down on the log. I kept telling myself, "I can do this!" I felt that as long as my big brother was there, I would be just fine. As I sat there on that damp, musty log that was probably home to many little creatures, Mike told me, "Put your feet up against that stump in front of you and be prepared to feel like it's pushing you back." After he gave me detailed instructions on how to hold it and where to position it, I placed that powerful piece of equipment against my right shoulder and looked cautiously toward my big brother who nodded that it was okay. I was not ready for what happened next. As I pulled the trigger and tried hard to remain in an upright position against the backfire of the rifle, I was knocked over into the brush. Mike laughed because in spite of my fall, I had actually hit one empty can.

Mike was always there for my sisters and me, trying as hard as he could never to let anyone or anything hurt us. He had a tough time being the only male and the oldest child. He did whatever it took to keep us out of harm's way. This brings me to my most vivid memory of my brother Mike. On a chilly day in 1971 the Taku winds were beginning to stir up a little, creating a low howl. The Taku winds are so powerful they can lift up a fifty-pound child

and then drop him a few feet down the road. They can also make you walk much faster than you intended by giving you a strong push from behind.

On this particular adventure Mike took my sisters and me to the Channel in downtown Juneau, Alaska. The Channel was where the boats docked whenever they came into town, but it was also a place for the local people to fish. He wanted to try to do a little bit of fishing that day as winter was almost over, but soon his line got stuck. After trying everything he could to free it, he told Denise and me, "Find me a board so I can get my line loose." We found a great board and as we picked it up, we saw an old pile of snow beneath it. I lifted the front end of the board and Denise picked up the opposite end. Denise stepped on the old pile of snow, thinking it was solid. Suddenly, Denise fell through a hole hidden under the snow. She hit her head on the beam as she fell and was knocked unconscious into the freezing water. My sisters and I screamed over to Mike, "There goes Denise. She fell and she's floating away!" Mike glanced over to where I was pointing and a terrified look spread across his face. Without any warning, Mike dove into the icy water, fully clothed and in our father's best shoes. He desperately wanted to save his littlest sister. However, in his race to save her life, he had forgotten that he did not know how to swim. The entire time my sisters and I were screaming wildly and crying because we were losing sight of her. A stranger in a boat sped up to Mike, pulled him out of the water and tended to him.

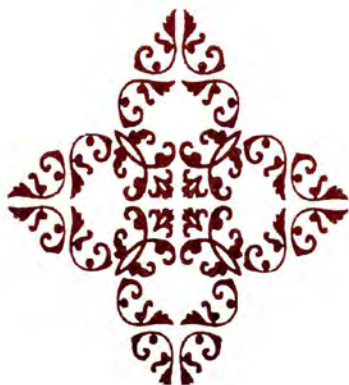
Meanwhile, the local Fire Department had arrived and was preparing to rescue Denise. Because they couldn't swim with all their clothes and gear on, they took everything off down to their underwear. Nearby was an elderly woman with her miniature poodle on a leash. She yelled for them to put their clothes back on. One fireman tried to explain why they were undressing, but she wouldn't hear one word of it. Another local Juneauite had rapidly approached Denise in his boat and retrieved her from the water. He began to resuscitate her and then they rushed her to the hospital where she spent a long time recovering.

Mike's main concern was whether Denise was going to be okay. He was upset because he couldn't get her out of the water, and he knew well the dangers of the cold Alaskan waters. Mike received a

medal and was recognized publicly for his courageous attempt. This particular day turned out to be a very special one for me. Not only was my little sister alive, but my belief that my big brother would do anything to keep us safe, was confirmed. That cold chilly day magnified my love and respect for him.

On that chilly day in 1971 and on many other occasions after that, my love and respect for my brother grew tremendously. We became very close and even now keep in touch and talk about many things. He will always be my big brother and he will always fill a very special place in my heart. The last lesson I remember Mike giving me was to walk tall with my head held high and not hung in shame. I

remember walking with him on a warm afternoon to the 20th Century Supermarket. I was walking with my head hung down, looking at the sidewalk, as I routinely did, when Mike looked over at me and told me to look him in his eyes. He then very gently said, "Sis, don't walk like you're afraid or not important. Hold your head up so you can see what's in front of you. If you hold your head up when you walk you'll show people that you're important and special!" I looked lovingly towards him and began to hold my head up high. Today I am thirty-seven years old and those words still ring loud and clear in my mind and in my ears. And if I catch myself looking at the sidewalk as I am walking, I remember to raise my head and walk tall.



A Brainless Act

Second period had just ended at Kaiser High School in the fall of 1995 and we were at recess. I met my friends in the usual spot—the handicap railings in front of the cafeteria. My friends were Kahanu, Celeste, Waylon, Jonette, and Dollette at that time. I didn't want to go to my next class because I just did not feel like going. Honestly, I was a little naughty during my high school years. I would cut school when I did not feel like going or if I did not do my homework or when I wanted to go to the beach. I had asked if anyone felt the same way. Everyone pretty much agreed except for Dollette. She said she was pretty sure that she had a test next period. But she assured us that she would cut school some other day.

We left school and started walking to my house, making sure that we weren't seen. My house is located in back of the school, down a road that is a quarter of a mile long and happens to be a dead end. When you first turn onto the road, my house is on the right corner and the school is on the left. So, while we were walking, we were in plain view of both the school and my house. As soon as we reached the front door of my white two-story house, everyone asked if I had something to eat.

"There are some Pizza Pockets in the freezer and soda in the bottom shelf of the fridge," I said.

Everyone grabbed something to eat and drink, then headed to my living room to watch TV. While eating and watching TV in my living room, Jonette was on the phone with her friend, Waylon kept going outside, and Kahanu, Celeste and I were playing cards. We were all getting irritated and concerned about Waylon going in and out of my house.

"Waylon, get your ass inside the house." Jonette yelled as soon as she got off the phone.

"Some guy wants to come in," he replied.

"NO! Do you want the whole school to know that we're here?" I said. "Do you want us to get busted?"

Waylon finally came inside. We started to talk about when we were going to go back to class. We all decided that we would go back tomorrow. Even though Waylon was in the house, he kept looking out of the window. The last time he looked outside was when he saw the police pull up to my house.

"You guys, the cops are here." Waylon said in a nervous tone of voice.

"WHAT! Are you serious?" I said

"Yup!" replied Waylon

I looked out my front door window. He was right. There were three police cars. I told everyone to go upstairs and hide in the closets, so everyone did. About three minutes after that I heard a knock on my front door. I opened the door and two police officers asked what I was doing home and not at school. At that time I was scared and responded with the first thing I could think of. I told them I was sick. They looked at me like they knew something was wrong.

"Whose shoes are these?" one of the officers asked, as he pointed to the ground in front of my door.

"Mine, my brother's, my mother's, and my stepfather's," I replied.

"Can we come in?"

"Yeah, sure."

They came in and started to look around. One of the officers went upstairs so I followed him. The other officer stayed downstairs.

"It smells like sweat up here."

I did not say a word. My mind was panicking and the only thing on my mind was that we were going to get caught. Seeing that one of the doors was closed, the officer called his partner to come upstairs. As soon as the other officer got upstairs, they opened the door, looked around and then opened

the closet doors.

"Well, look what we have here, two sorry little teenagers. Get out of there now."

"I'll check the other rooms," said the officer who was downstairs.

I couldn't believe it. We were busted! The other officer yelled out that he had found two more of my friends. We were then escorted outside where my mother was waiting. She looked at me with fire in her eyes. I could only imagine what she was thinking. I knew I was in big trouble.

When we were outside, the officers told us that they got a call from one of my neighbors who thought my house was being robbed, when it was really Waylon going in and out of my house. I felt so embarrassed by this whole situation.

Kahanu, Celeste, Jonette, and Waylon got into the police cars while I was put into my mother's car. As soon as we got into her black Ford Taurus, she started to yell at me.

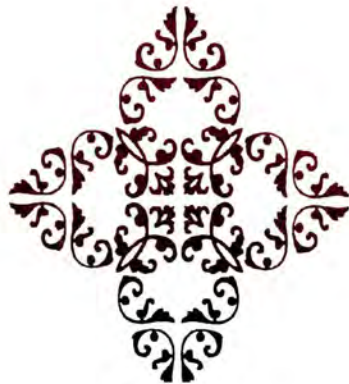
"HOW THE HELL COULD YOU DO SUCH A BRAINLESS THING LIKE THAT? WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

I didn't say a thing. I was so ashamed. She told me that I was grounded for a month, I could not use the phone, and my chores were doubled. I had to come straight home from school and the only time I could go out was if I had soccer practice or a game. I didn't really think much of having been grounded.

I just wanted to go back home and sleep the whole thing off.

When we arrived at school, the officers took us one by one into a room. My name was finally called. While walking to the truant room, my stomach felt like it had butterflies inside. I walked into the room and sat on a chair. The officer asked questions and I answered. One question he asked was why I had lied. I told him that I didn't know why. I finally got to leave, but before I was able to head home, I had to serve after-school detention. During detention I slept because my mind was full of thoughts about the whole situation. When detention was over, I went home. As soon as I got home I went straight up to my room, before my mother could talk to me again. I closed my door, locked it, and went to sleep. I didn't wake up until the next morning.

When I look back at that time in my life I laugh because I did not have a clue about right and wrong. I was only thinking of having as much fun as I could. Before getting arrested I felt delighted to be going home and to be hanging out with my friends. It never came across my mind that I would actually get arrested, especially at my house. During the entire procedure of getting arrested, I felt like an embarrassed loser. I knew that it was my own fault and that I could have prevented it. Now I look back and think how stupid and immature I was. I learned a lesson that day and I never cut school again.



Just Another Man

Growing up in Hawaii in the 1950's was enjoyable, full of day to day experiences, minor events, yet ones that seemed so important at the time. Then there was the growing out of childhood at a time when America was engaging in war in a far, far away place called Vietnam. It was definitely the end of a dreamy life, and the growing up, far too fast, of a lot of young American men and women.

Yes, growing up in rural Hawaii, on the big island, the farthest place on earth from every continent, in a modest income family, was a pretty sheltered life. It was very remote from all those other countries in the world; very remote from the people living in those far away places; very remote from international politics.

As a young boy there were those long trips, sometimes two to three days long, travelling horseback with Grandpa and Grandma, going all the way to the other side of the island to work in the sugar cane fields. It was very hard work for very low wages, but how exciting and what a trip it was, camping far away from home.

Growing into adolescence meant going to school, but also going fishing. This young boy loved going out with his uncle to learn how to throw the fishing nets. And of course there was the coming home, triumphant, with a catch of multi-colored fishes you only find in these waters and that Grandma would proudly cook for the entire family. Sitting down with them to enjoy those feasts of fish and rice, or poi sometimes, was a very simple and yet very memorable experience. This was also the time when the adults around the table would start talking about a war America was getting involved in, in a faraway place, somewhere in Asia, called Vietnam.

From then on things started to accelerate. This boy was coming of age—not exactly a “boy” anymore, yet certainly not an adult. The draft came, a

chance to move from home and see the world at an age when you long for it so much.

What a different world that was! The army was kind of exciting at first. It meant making new friends, learning how to fire all kinds of weapons and training in Special Forces. Training came to an end eventually, and it was now time to travel and go to this place that everybody was talking about, VIETNAM! How different it would be—from everyday life on the Big Island to a life full of adventure and action; a dream come true for an adolescent.

Reality came down though, fast, very fast, and pretty soon there was only fear, death and misery, far beyond imagination, all around this man, or was he a man already? What happened to the adolescent of yesterday, still an adolescent at seventeen, and yet already a man? What was with this growing up all of a sudden? In a normal life the main preoccupation should be to fall in love, maybe with one of your high school sweethearts. This is America in the late 1950's, early 1960's, this is the way it is supposed to be, isn't it? What happened to America? While it is changing and growing up, so is our boy.

We are now in the jungle in Vietnam, maybe Laos or Cambodia at times, where the only thing you have is life and your buddies. You are constantly surrounded by fear and death—the death of those people you learned to hate and have been trained to kill, the death of your buddy, who only the night before you went out drinking with. Oh yes, America, where you need to be twenty-one to have a beer with a friend, but only eighteen to be given a gun, and go kill or die for your country.

DEATH, FEAR, EVERYWHERE, EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY! But wait a minute, what is death anyway? Something you've learned to look at in the eye, something you live with daily, something which has become your mistress, this woman you are flirting with on a constant basis.

And then there is that day when the helicopter you're being flown in is shot down. As it is going down, you are looking at the ground coming up along with pretty certain death. You are in a dream. You decide to jump out before the final crash and you survive, the only one of all the men on board.

You wake up in Thailand, in a hospital bed, pretty badly injured, your body covered with shrapnel, but alive! You spend six months there, healing, far away from hell. You even fall in love for the first time in your life. Her dad indirectly "sold" her to you because you're an American GI—not so romantic, but you are still a boy, eighteen years old, and there is only love! Things like that happen at your age—you find your first love, the one that you will keep and cherish for the rest of your life. Isn't life wonderful after all? STOP! You are now healed and fit for combat. You are being sent back to Vietnam again!

Your officers won't let you marry the girl. She is Vietnamese, from the south, but still Vietnamese, and you are too young, too immature to decide for yourself. They are here to help you, to protect you from yourself, so go ahead my boy, go back to the jungle, to the killing. Do it, FOR YOUR COUNTRY!

Finally, the day comes when you finish your tour of duty, and it is now time to go home. Again, you cannot bring the girl, they won't let you, but at least you are still alive, in one piece so to speak, and you are going home! The dream is going to stop, you are going to wake up in that beautiful country you left two years ago, or was it a hundred years? You are going home, the plane is landing, and here you are, a hero. You are one of those coming home alive, not in a casket, not in a wheel chair. Your country can be proud of you, and what a good time this is going to be. LIFE! You will be living life to the fullest, not having to watch your friends die everyday. This is it, the plane comes to a stop, the door is being opened, "AMERICA, HERE I COME"!

Yes, the crowds are there, with all those bouquets of flowers, waiting to celebrate your triumphant return! Oh, but wait a minute, these are not flowers in their hands, they are stones, and they are throwing them at you, hitting you in the back of the head. What is happening? They are booing you! What is happening? There is a big movement going on in America, people are revolting against this war, they don't want it! All of a sudden, you are not their HERO, you are their SHAME!

You are now lost in total confusion. What is this all about? Why the killing, the fighting, the dying of your friends and now your people not even recognizing you as one of their own anymore? Weren't you doing it for your country? This is all too confusing, your head is spinning, you do not understand, you do not know where to go. You end up signing again and you volunteer to go back to this place that has become your home, and that is welcoming you again, VIETNAM!

And here you are, back! At least your girl friend can come from Thailand and stay with you on base. Life is good, so to speak. You are back to the routine you have learned there, the one that became your everyday lot—life, death, death, life. Death is all around and it has become part of your life; you have adapted to it, what a wonderful species we are!

Then comes this day in your life when you are on a special mission deep in the jungle, and you and your buddies get ambushed. You get shot in the upper torso, twice, and as you are trying to escape there is an explosion and a big flash—a hand grenade! This is always happening to the other guy, but this time it is your turn. You are injured very badly. Your friends are carrying you away, while being pursued trying to escape. As you are hiding in the forest, lying down, you are waiting to die. These guys are going to find you, and finish you. You are praying and waiting. This is it, the big moment has come!

Have you seen the movie *Platoon*, where the American forces are outnumbered and being massacred? One of the soldiers hides under a dead body and waits all alone in the face of death. This is the kind of situation you are in now, if you can imagine it, but like in the movie, maybe because it is raining very heavily, they do not find you, and you get to live. The helicopter comes and you wake up in a hospital bed again, very badly injured, but alive. Only this time they have to amputate your right leg at knee level.

You are going home my boy, not a kid anymore, but not a full man either with this limb missing. You are not even twenty years old but you feel like you are one hundred. You are the recipient of two purple heart decorations, and you are going home to a country proudly served, a country that is very hostile to what you did and what you represent.

As this man finishes relating his story to me and proceeds with serving us lunch, I can't help looking at him. You would never know he is wearing a prosthesis, but when you look deep in his eyes you know a big part of him has died. Life as he knew it came to a sudden halt with the loss of his limb. The sparkle that is missing in his eyes reflects the fact that a big chunk of his soul never really came back.

As we are eating I learn that he is the only one left alive among his friends that made it back. The last one died just the year before, and now at fifty-two he is just waiting for his turn.

I do not mention the name of this man I just interviewed, not for lack of respect, but because he is only one of many who remain unknown. So many young men and women went to fight and die, not really knowing why, but were just told to do so.

They came back only to find that they were an embarrassment to the same society that sent them there. Those kids were robbed of their youth, their innocence, and their very own souls. It is we who should be ashamed of having sent them there in the first place.

They became "a lost generation", one that had to be hidden and forgotten, because nobody really knew what to do with them or with the shame they represented. How well we all remember pictures, like the one made famous by *Time* magazine, of the little girl running naked, her little body consumed by napalm. This is an embarrassment to American society! We should be ashamed of this absurd, monstrous phenomenon that is a part of our societies, WAR itself!



Thank You Friends and AP Classes

Every year there are hundreds and thousands of seniors who can't wait to graduate from high school. While I was a senior I felt the need to get out of school because my classes were getting so difficult and overwhelming. I wanted to scream, "HELP ME!" yet, at the same time I wanted to stay in school so I could spend more time with my friends before we went off to different colleges.

My alma mater, President William McKinley High School, had its graduation on Sunday, June 4, 2000. Just hours before commencement, I recall beginning to feel nervous. My palms were sweating and my stomach felt as if something was crawling inside of it. I was sad and pretty much on the verge of crying because I couldn't believe that the day I had been waiting for all my life had finally come. During the commencement exercises, I started to reminisce about my senior year at McKinley.

I remembered very clearly how my AP (Advanced Placement) Biology and Calculus classes gave me so much stress. There were many occasions when I wanted to drop both AP classes and enjoy the rest of my senior year at McKinley and NOT at a mental institution. In my AP Biology class, we were assigned to read one or two chapters a week from the \$90.00, red spine, black cover, 1,200-page required textbook. A typical chapter in the textbook was about fifteen to twenty pages long! Multiplied by two chapters a week, I ended up reading anywhere from 30-40 pages a week throughout the entire school year. Along with the individual reading, we were given quizzes on every itty-bitty detail from every chapter that was assigned, as well as several labs (one once involved mating computerized fruit flies), that were related to the materials in the textbook. Besides taking AP Biology, I also took Calculus.

I distinctly recall that calculus was the class that ruined my GPA, making me graduate with a GPA of 3.475, just 0.025 away from a 3.500 GPA, which would've made me an honor graduate. I must ad-

mit, Calculus wasn't as tiresome as Biology, but it definitely was hard to comprehend trying to apply "chain rule" to "implicit differentiation". In this class, we were assigned several sections of homework every day. As I can remember, we finished only four chapters out of the sixteen chapters that were in the textbook of more than 1,000 pages. I remember thinking, as did many of my classmates, that working at a slow pace was good. But I discovered that it was one of the main reasons why I didn't do so well in that class. From my personal experience, moving at a slow pace isn't very good in a math class because you tend to forget what you learned a couple of sections back. As a result, when it's test time, you don't remember how to do the sections that were learned early on in the chapter.

Despite my challenging classes, I enjoyed all the times that my friends, Owen, Gavin, Nancy, Rosslyn, Janet, and I spent together, whether it was in or out of school. My friends and I would always help each other when in need and were pretty much active in the same clubs and committees. I remember how we constantly ran around campus trying to help the senior class with some of its many activities. We were involved in making banners for the senior luau, trying to find escorts and attendants for our big night, the senior prom, and selling Li-Hing Mui candy to reduce the cost of Project Graduation. I also remembered when we planned our first activity for the Japanese Club. At first we didn't have a clue as to what we wanted to do, so at that point we knew that we had to work together and be open to opinions that others had to offer. After asking for advice from the club members, looking at how much money we had, wanting an activity we would enjoy and one in which we would get to know each other, we decided on having a sushi-making activity.

Besides participating in club activities, I was also co-chairing the Cap and Gown Announcement Committee for commencement. Many thought that chair-

ing this particular committee simply meant passing out the caps and gowns when they arrived. While co-chairing this committee, I experienced that although it was a lot of fun leaving class early, being late to my next class, and having lunch at Pizza Hut, it was also very time consuming because of all the problems that arose in the shipments of the orders. I can distinctly recall two major problems that came up about a month before graduation. One of them was the mix-up about the cap and gown shipments. Some people got gowns that were obviously meant for college graduates getting their Master's Degree. Another problem that I encountered was that some people had gotten a black and gold tassel when everyone was suppose to get a solid black tassel. Because my committee and I had no way of knowing which students had the wrong items, I searched for those students by putting reminders in the bulletin everyday urging them to bring back the wrong item to be exchanged for the correct one.

As I was reminiscing during the commencement exercises, I realized that I had been taking AP classes not only to have them look good on my college transcripts, but also for my own good. I had been asked time and time again, "Crystal, why are you taking AP classes in your senior year? You're not supposed to be stressing. You should be having fun!" At first, I did not exactly find an answer to that question,

but if I could find all the people who asked me that question, I would say that I have greatly benefited from experiencing the pressure of actually sitting in a college class.

I have also realized that my friends and I had many great memories while we were in high school: participating in the same activities, going to banquets and proms, being in the same group whenever we were assigned group projects, and some of us becoming boyfriend and girlfriend. Some of my friends have gone off to the mainland for college while many of us have stayed here in the islands and are attending different schools. I have been given the opportunity to move on and make new friends and I know that my old friends and I will always be there for each other no matter where we are.

Now that I have completed one milestone in my life, I feel that my life has just begun. Graduating from high school has definitely changed who I am and how I see myself. It has opened a whole new world for me that I could never have pictured while going to high school from eight in the morning till two in the afternoon. My experience in high school has prepared me for being in a college environment as well as having the opportunity to make new friends and to start all over again.



How Bobby and I Became Brothers

I remember the day I first noticed Bobby at a pet store in Kahala. He was on a branch in a futuristic type of cage made of Plexiglas and wood. He stood a foot tall with a white feather coat that had gold highlights. The top of his head was crowned with a golden crest of ten feathers that he could stand upright at will, making a fan. He started looking at me with his head turned to the side and tilted upward, so that he could concentrate on me with one of his piercing black eyes.

This was in June of 1997. A sign on his cage read, "born April of 1996." I found out that he was a resident of the pet store for quite a while, from the time he was born till now. I wondered why nobody wanted such a beautiful bird as this one. I asked the store clerk if I could let Bobby out of his cage. She told me that would be fine, but warned me about how aggressive Bobby was.

I told the lady I'd take the chance of being bitten and proceeded to open his cage. At first he stared at me with hesitation, so I began calling him over. "Bobby, come," I called. "Bobby pretty bird, love love" I called again. With the second call, he hopped off his perch and waddled over to me. That day I spent twenty minutes with him. Bobby loved to be scratched under his wings and on top of his head. "This bird is cool", I thought to myself. Then I bought the items I originally intended to buy, and left.

The second time I saw Bobby was about a week later. I asked the same clerk if I could spend more time with Bobby.

She said, "Sure go right ahead."

This time Bobby remembered me from the first visit and jumped off of his perch as soon as I opened the door to his cage. He then climbed on top of his cage. I guess he wanted to get a better look at me. As I was scratching his neck he suddenly turned his head and bit me on the hand. "Ahhhhh, that's sore!"

I yelped. I asked, "Bobby why'd you bite me?" He walked around the top of his cage making a circle, ending up in front of me, and put his head down for more scratching. I told him, "Bobby I'll give you more scratch, scratch if you don't bite me." He looked at me after he heard this and lifted up his wings. The rest of the visit Bobby was both polite and kind.

The next time I saw Bobby another week had gone by. As soon as I walked into the pet store Bobby jumped down from his perch and greeted me with a "Hello." I was happy he recognized me and said, "Hello Bobby, how you brother?" and I let him out of his cage.

By this time one of the other store clerks noticed me visiting with Bobby. She came over to us and introduced herself as Susan. Susan told me that I seemed to be bonding well with Bobby and asked if I had any intentions of buying him. I told her that I hadn't given it much thought because he would cost nine hundred dollars. "I can't afford him right now," I said to her.

She told me if I really wanted to buy Bobby she'd drop the price to five hundred dollars for me. I looked at Bobby, who was cruising on my arm, thought for a moment, then turned back to Susan and said, "I'll go home tonight and see how long it will take to raise the money and I'll get back to you."

At home that night I went over my finances and I estimated it would take me a month to raise the cash. I also imagined how happy Bobby would be to be free of the pet store. I wondered how he'd react to his new surroundings, with a whole new world to learn about. I said to myself, "It'll be great; he'll look magnificent right here in my living room."

The next day I went to the pet store to let Susan know what I had worked out. She agreed that my plans would be great, but also told me that if any-

one wanted to purchase Bobby before I could come up with the money she would have to sell him. I let her know I understood this and that I'd try to raise the five hundred as soon as possible. I spent thirty minutes with Bobby, telling him about my home. I even asked him how he would like the idea of being my brother? He seemed happy at the thought, mumbling as cockatoos do.

For the next two weeks I went to the pet store every other day, spending thirty to forty minutes each time with Bobby. By now he felt comfortable sitting on my shoulder as we walked around the store. I'd tell him about the area in my living room where I had torn out the carpet and put down linoleum for him and about the new cage I had picked. "Bobby pretty bird," he'd say excitedly.

"You're right," was my reply.

In the beginning of the second week tragedy struck—I walked into the pet store and Bobby was gone. Susan told me a lady had bought Bobby the day before; she added that the lady seemed both nice and kind. This made me feel better even though I knew I'd never see little Bobby again. Susan, seeing how sad I looked, found it in her heart to tell me how sorry she was.

I told her there was no need to feel sorry, because Bobby must be happy to be adopted. I was trying to see a brighter side to this situation. I said to Susan, "It's all good," and left the store with a smile.

A week went by. I thought of Bobby every time I walked by the spot where I had ripped out the carpet. I said to myself, "Oh boy, I should have waited." Suddenly the phone rang. It was Susan. I had given her my phone number in case anything should go wrong with Bobby's adoption.

She told me, "Bobby's back. The lady returned him, and he's up for sale again."

I told her, "I'll be right down with the money." I rushed to gather my wallet and my keys then bolted out the front door.

When I walked into the pet store Bobby started doing cartwheels in his cage. I wrote out a check for him and the cage, and when the transaction was over, everyone was happy. Susan was happy for Bobby and me, Bobby was happy that I was finally able to adopt him, and I was happy about gaining a new brother. As they say in storybooks, "and everyone lived happily ever after."



Returning Home

Counselors constantly nag high school students to start looking for a college in our junior year. By our senior year, we should have our applications and essays ready for the potential colleges. All this hype can really get teenagers caught up in the excitement and make them forget if they really want to leave the city that they have grown so fond of. Back in high school I truly believed that by leaving Hawaii I was going to be more successful in my future so I decided to leave—a mistake that corrected itself.

I bought the ticket and tried to share some memorable activities with each of my true friends before I left for San Francisco. I still did not realize the consequences of my decision. I was glad to be the one leaving and not the one left behind. Derrick, Newman, Chris, Donovan, and I did not show any remorse until the day of my departure. Up till then things were pretty much the same, we would do what we normally did. Most of the time that meant a bunch of us would be at Sandy beach late at night. With the swishing sound of the waves hitting the sand in the background, we would retell the many stories that we all shared. As each wave pushed salty winds into our faces, we laughed about old times. Just the five of us would always be standing there by our cars, with only the moon and a couple of streetlights shining upon us from above, while the dark night skies stretched out to the heavens. Nobody talked about me leaving, and that kind of made it seem like the time would come just as sure as the sun would rise.

Checking in and passing through the metal detectors went smoothly at the airport gate and I was soon on the plane. Then everything screeched to a halt and I realized what was happening. I did not know when I would ever see them again, or if I ever would. It seemed that everything stood still, because all of the passengers' mumblings, flight attendants' greetings, and the intercom's squawkings

fell unheard on my ears. Only images came to me. I saw each and every one of my friends' distinct smiles and heard their laughs. Derrick has a big grin on his round face. Newman's smile shows all of his bright, straight teeth. Chris' long smirk stretches across his face. And finally, Donovan's funny smile always causes his eyes to become two slanted lines.

I relived some of the moments we had shared. There was the time when all five of us had to push Chris's car down a hill because it had hit a curb. We had to stop the car every twenty feet to turn the wheel that was no longer connected to the steering column. It was four in the morning and we were tired and just wished all this was a bad dream and we would awaken soon. The cold night air helped us through till we got to the bottom of that winding road. This was one of the many times we had shared together. Nobody was there to help us except for ourselves, just the five of us. It was times like these that had made us close like brothers.

Besides our hardships, we shared many great times. There was the Christmas party we went to during our senior year. That was the first time we got drunk together, and each one of us did something we would regret and barely remember. The day after, we were already teasing each other about the humiliating acts we had performed. Donovan never made it up the stairs, Derrick drank till he lost his voice, and Newman threw up all over my pants and ended the party that Chris's cousin had thrown.

We enjoyed talking to each other. We talked about girls, cars, sports, and our futures, over and over again. These friends knew me inside and out, and I was about to leave them. Suddenly everything felt so real. I could hear the plane engine start to hiss, and then I was on my way to that long stretch of runway. Just like that, like the snap of a finger, I had left them at the airport.

I don't remember how long the plane sat there at the start of the runway. It seemed to be taking its sweet old time carrying me away from what I considered to be the best times of my youth. I felt so helpless, and I regretted leaving so much. Tears were already forming at my eyes. Before they fell, I could already taste and smell their saltiness. My vision blurred, but I did not want to wipe my eyes dry. Nobody had pressured me into leaving except myself. My friends did not want to get in the way of my future so they supported me with my decision. I wished badly to take back my decision, and then I would be back at the terminal laughing and joking with them again. Then I realized that a thousand feet of blue skies separated me from everyone that I loved.

That was the beginning of my four-month stay in San Francisco. I felt many regrets. Maybe I should have spent more time with my friends before I left. We ought to have done all the things we always said we would do. There was always talk about jet skiing and clubbing, but we were either under aged or could not afford it. I was also questioning my real reason for leaving Hawaii. It seemed that I had left for the wrong reason because I could have gotten just as good an education in Hawaii as in California

since I ended up at a city college anyway. I realized that I might have left Hawaii just to leave Hawaii and not really to better my education. Maybe I left Hawaii because I just wanted something different and not necessarily better. After a while, I started to realize that was a terrible reason for leaving, not to mention very selfish, and I could hardly wait for a chance to return to Hawaii and rectify all I had done wrong, especially the way I had wronged my friends.

I hope that high school counselors will make sure every single high school senior knows just how painful it is to leave home. Before anybody considers going away for school, they must contemplate if that is really what they want. After a while in California, I realized that I did not have to go there to study. All I really needed was a little piece of paper called a diploma and a little interning experience to get me into a job of my profession. There were two ways of doing it. I could have studied in California, which was what I chose, or I could have stayed in Hawaii to study and have a whole lot more fun doing it, which was the way it turned out to be. As the saying goes, "It is not the destination, but the trip that makes it all worthwhile."



Cabo Wabo

If you're like me, you are young, stupid and let your emotions get the best of you. Hopefully, you are not like me, but maybe you once were and can relate to my story. Last summer I fell in love overnight. I was hanging out with my friends at the local hot spot. Lulu's is the one and only place to dance and party on the weekend in our little Hawaiian town of Kona.

Having lived in Hawaii almost four years, I could tell the locals from the tourists. I was trying to ignore a table of obvious tourists and carry on a conversation with my friend, but they were at a table right behind me and they just wouldn't give up. So, with all of the aloha I could muster (plus they bought me a few drinks) I sat down to "talk story" with the Florida boys. They turned out to be quite interesting. One guy at the table (whom I'll call the "Big Boss") was a multimillionaire who made his fortune in the shipping industry. He was a robust man with a big belly. On first appearance he seemed almost jolly, but if you looked into his eyes you could see the wheels in his head constantly turning, calculating, and judging. It was as if he led his whole life unsure of who his real friends were. The man sitting to his left was one of his clients, who just sat there staring and drinking with his out-dated eyeglasses half-cocked and a dazed drunk look on his face—he was just happy to be in Hawaii. The third guy was a deck hand for the Big Boss's three and a half million-dollar pleasure/fishing yacht which he used to enter billfish tournaments around the world. He was young, in his late twenties; his body was strong and tan from working on the boat. He had sparkling green eyes, short strawberry blonde hair and a silly smile that seemed to say, "Hi, I'm just a kid having fun."

After an evening with them playing the "I can impress you game," I decided it was time for me to go home. The Big Boss insisted that I let his deck hand walk me to my car. Somehow, between the

table and my parked jeep, the deck hand, whose name was Joey, managed to get my phone number.

The next day Joey called and said, "The Big Boss is gone, why don't you come out to the yacht for a tour?" Reluctantly I accepted, and much to my surprise, a romance began. Joey said and did all the right things. We were sure that fate had brought us together for a reason, but there was a problem. Joey was going to be in town for only a few more days. During hurricane season, he would venture in the yacht across the Pacific Ocean to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. We spent every moment we could together during those last few days and then we had a sad and dramatic parting as he motored away into the first light of dawn.

That first day without him I was inconsolable. I barely made it through my day at work without crying. I raced to my parents' home for comfort only to be ridiculed for my stupidity of falling for a tourist. Determined to make our relationship work, we e-mailed each other everyday and made plans for me to visit to Cabo.

When it finally came time to go, I had to make many sacrifices. I was in school part-time and worked part-time. I had to quit my job, move out of my apartment and complete all of my midterms ahead of time. Plus, I had to brush up on my Spanish. It was a challenge mentally and financially, but I knew it was worth it. We are talking about the love of my life here.

After a full day of travel, I faced harsh Mexican custom agents and then managed to find a van to take me from the airport to my hotel about an hour away. As I sat in that van, fear started to paralyze me. The words of my parents rang through my mind "You'll be raped and murdered before you reach town." I looked around and noticed that the last person who spoke English was about to get out of the van. The next thing I knew, I was the only one

left in the van. I started to doubt the driver. Does he know where he is going? Why am I the last stop? Am I being kidnapped? I was about to burst into tears, but then I saw the most beautiful thing. It was the Best Western. I had made it.

Triumphantly, I jumped out of the van. I paid the driver and went into the lobby. Joey was forced to be on the yacht about a nautical hour away. He was working for a few days with the Big Boss but he had promised me that a Mexican boy would show up at my hotel to tour me around safely in his absence.

Feeling pretty brave and powerful, after succeeding in my long journey, I decided to go for a short walk while I was waiting for Gorge (my tour guide.) I crossed the street and took about three steps when a big man in his early twenties reached out with both hands and cupped my breasts. I almost died right there. Barely breathing, I stumbled, scared and embarrassed, back into my hotel room. I locked the door and decided it would be safer to just take a nap while I waited for Gorge.

After what really was forever (Mexican time is twice as slow as Hawaiian time) Gorge arrived. Gorge was adorable. He had the friendliest big brown, soft eyes and curly black hair. He was a little on the pudgy side, spoke to me in broken English and bits of Spanish, animating with his hands and making up for the words I didn't catch with a warm, sincere smile. We introduced ourselves and I told him I was starving. We hopped in his Pinto and he took me out for the best fish tacos I had ever tasted.

Boy, was I glad to have Gorge and I was glad I had brushed up on my Spanish, too, because there was a big language barrier. Spending time with Gorge, I learned so much about the people of Mexico, the differences in culture, and a few things about tequila I probably don't need to mention.

A few days passed quickly and the moment I had been waiting eight weeks for finally arrived. I stood on the pier filled with excitement and watched Joey's boat pull up to the dock, only to be frustrated by his comment, "Wait a minute, I'm busy here." Oops, I guess I should have waited for him to finish tying up the boat. When he was finished, he kissed me (not passionately like I had envisioned he would) and told me he had missed me (not very sincerely). I was secretly mortified but decided that he was probably just tired from his week at sea. He

told me to wait on the yacht while he made a couple of important phone calls and dropped off a roll of film.

I went aboard and plopped down on the familiar plush couch and watched the Spanish version of ESPN in the cool air-conditioning of the luxury liner. I was glad to be checked out of my not-so-plush room at the not-so-best Western. It started to get dark outside, and Joey had still not returned. Some of the other crewmembers looked at me pityingly and offered to take me out to dinner. Not wanting to seem smothering, and thinking Joey might need some time to himself after his difficult week, I accepted their offer. When I returned to the yacht, he still wasn't there. I arranged all of my things neatly in the cabin room, and he still did not appear. As a matter of fact he didn't come back at all that night.

The next morning I awoke, heart-broken. Minutes later he came into the room full of apologies and explanations. I decided everything would be okay if I didn't make a big deal out of it. Boys will be boys, right?

Later that morning we went out to breakfast and I was looking forward to a fresh start, but Joey seemed preoccupied. I stayed optimistic until later that afternoon. Joey was away chatting with the captain of the boat in the next slip when I noticed the envelope of pictures he had developed the day before. The first few were of the boat, the crew and fish. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw next. It was a picture of a girl sitting on Joey's bed. She was a blonde, quite pretty. I knew I had been cheated on. I felt like such a fool. My parents were right. My mind raced with thoughts of what I should do. I was in Mexico, for God's sake. I couldn't just go home. It wasn't that simple.

All I wanted was to save the little dignity I had left, so I made a decision that I would not freak out. He did not deserve my tears or anymore of my time. I quietly grabbed my belongings and went out the door. Joey saw me leave the yacht and he asked where I was going, but he saw my bag and realized I must have seen the pictures. I could just tell by the look on his face that we understood each other. I lied and said with all of the confidence I had left that I was going for a walk. We both knew that wasn't the case.

I walked about two blocks, fighting off the tears

successfully, parked myself in a half-empty bar and ordered a pacifico. I needed time to think, and on my budget, this was the only place that would have me. I wasn't half way through my beer when I met my first angel, a guy named Steve, down there on business from California. Steve was middle-aged and balding, but was dressed quite fashionably, the way you might expect from a man experiencing a mid-life crisis. I was already assuming he was going to start in on a story about his new sports car, when he bought me my second beer. I had nothing else to do, so, I told him my sob story. It turns out he had a sob story too, so we drank some more and pretended our stories were funny. They weren't. I was alone in Mexico and he was bound for divorce.

Before we knew it, the crowd really picked up. The music was blasting, people were dancing and we were wasted. I screamed, "I love Cabo," as I danced on the table, my white dress soaked in tequila. Little did I know (or care) that I was drawing quite a crowd. I saw some of the crew members from the yacht and proceeded to tell them what an asshole Joey was. I was having a great time until I noticed that my purse was gone. I have never sobered up so quickly. The consequence of losing my purse might mean that I would not be able to leave the country. Even though I was in a crowded bar, I felt alone and scared. I pleaded with the waiters in my best Spanish to help me find my purse.

It was then that I met my second angel, Kasey, a young, hot dot-commer from Seattle. At first glance you could tell he went to prep school. His blonde hair was slicked back like Don Johnson and I think he was wearing a sweater vest. We hit it off right away. I'm from Seattle too, so we had something in common. He introduced me to his friends and promised if we didn't find my purse, he would personally fly me home in his private jet. What luck!

Just then it dawned on me to check under some of the tables. Suddenly, another patron at the bar crawled up next to me on the floor and produced my purse. Even though I was probably the most disgusting looking and smelling that I have ever been in public, Kasey and his friends invited me back to their room.

After a short cab ride we arrived at one of the most fabulous hotels I have ever seen. Even in the moonlight, it sparkled in tropical beauty, with lush landscaping, traditional Mexican architecture and a unique variety of stonework. It had a dreamy palatial quality.

When I tell my friends about my trip to Cabo I usually start the story here because this is where the vacation really began. Kasey and his friends were extraordinary in every way. They treated me like a princess. They started by ordering the most delicious room service. Then, they had my clothes washed (even my purse, which amazingly still contained all of my belongings) and put me to bed in my own suite attached to theirs.

This place was unbelievable. I felt like a little Cinderella being rescued by four knights in shining armor. We spent the rest of the week together, days at the beach, nights on the town. We even went to Sammy Hagar's birthday party at the famous Cabo Wabo.

I will never regret my trip to Mexico even though Joey didn't turn out to be the love of my life. I learned a lot of valuable lessons and made four of the best friends a girl could ask for. Plus, we happened to run into Joey while we were out having fun, and let's just say, revenge is sweet.

I just got an e-mail from Kasey and the crew yesterday. We are already planning next year's trip back to Cabo Wabo.

Black Rock

Black Rock is located on the north end of Ka'anapali Beach, right beside the Sheraton Hotel. Upon entering along the concrete sidewalk, in between the Ka'anapali Beach Hotel and the Sheraton Hotel, the sun's blinding light reflects off of the resting sand. The sand is so soft, it's like walking on cool flour. On the right-hand side of the Sheraton Hotel lies a large cliff formed by red and brown lava rock that slopes out into the ocean like an arm clawing to grip into the sand. Most of the year the water is so clear, you feel like you're swimming in liquid glass. Who needs goggles to snorkel? And the water is so cool it makes your skin smile.

At the tip of the large cliff lies Black Rock. This is where the locals and tourists jump off of the cliff, into the water. The rock has three levels: one at ten feet, another at twenty feet, and the highest one at about thirty feet. The highest ledge is home to the nastiest thing a person could ever encounter—a puddle of urine and ocean water that smells like a public rest room multiplied by four. Obviously, people can't wait two seconds to jump into the water to urinate! Looking out toward the land could make a person forget about the stench: the boats fill the ocean like spots on a Dalmatian, the coconut trees dance to the beat of the trade winds, the sugar cane fields carpet the land with many shades of green, like intricate patterns sewn on a quilt, and the famous "L" is stamped on top of Mt. Ball in the West Maui Mountains. I love Black Rock, not for its beauty, but because it is a place where I can forget about life's responsibilities and have fun with my friends.

I remember the day when I first jumped from "Cliff." It was in February of 1998. The largest north swell in recent memory destroyed the concrete sidewalk, turned many coconut trees upside down, and washed away all the sand. The water was now sewage green. A person couldn't see more than two feet deep. This day was windy and cold. The unfor-

giving wind blew constantly and my shivering body had "chicken skin". I stayed in the water most of the time to keep myself warm. Then we rocketed over to "Cliff." This is what the locals called the backside of black rock. I remember looking down thinking, "Oh-My-God! I'm gonna die!" It was a sharp sixty to seventy foot drop. I've always wanted to jump, but I could never get the courage to do so. I knew I had to do it this time, since my friends did it the last time we were here. We were there five minutes, dropping rocks to estimate the time a person would be in the air. It was about a four to five second drop to the bottom. Suddenly, out of nowhere, my friend, Duey, looked at us and said, "K-den guys," and off he went. The rest of us looked at each other in dismay and screamed, "This fucka is nuts!" Then, I said in a resigned tone, "SHIT, I gotta go some day." As I walked toward the edge off the cliff my legs felt like rubber, my heart started racing, and the butterflies in my stomach felt like bouncing basketballs. I swallowed my Adam's apple, and looked up at the sky, saying a prayer to God. It was a feeling I never had before. I jumped without saying a word. I went in so fast, it felt like my stomach pushed its way up to my throat. I dove into the water like a spear at 500 mph. As I surfaced to the top, I had a smile that spread from ear to ear. I looked at the behemoth that I jumped off. I thought to myself, "Damn! I just jumped that thing." It was a day I could never forget.

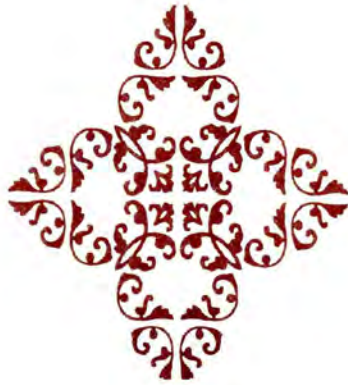
Another memorable moment at Black Rock was in the first week of June in 1998. I had just graduated from high school the week before. I decided to go to Black Rock with a bunch of friends. One group of friends became known as the "Bomb Squad", a trio made up of my brother, Junior, and my two cousins Kevin and Patrick. When these guys hit the water, they made fat spouts of water that launched thirty feet into the air. Anytime someone made a huge fountain of water, we would yell, "BOMB SQUAD

IN EFFECT!" to show our appreciation. Before we left Black Rock, I lined up with all my friends in a span of thirty feet and jumped off from left to right. It sounded like ten cannons going off, and all you could see was thunderous geysers of water erupting from the ground. We called it the "Finale," which is traditionally what we do before we leave. Then, we slowly swam back to shore.

That day the waves had been breaking at about two feet. The "Bomb Squad" and some other friends had been body surfing the waves, until someone got the Idea that we could hold hands and attempt to ride the waves. It was a sight to see, ten young men holding hands! We were yelling the word "friends"

in a sarcastic way. We did somersaults in the water and landed on our backs, faces, and butts. Even though we got hurt, it was all fun and games. We left that day, feeling exhausted and drained.

Every time I sit on top of Black Rock, I think about how lucky I am to have a place where I can have time to myself or with my friends. Growing up with a beautiful two-mile strip of beach, I can't imagine how my life would be without this place. Black Rock makes life so much better! Spending a day at Black Rock makes me forget about life's hassles and allows me to enjoy valuable time with my friends.



How Poverty Made Me Successful

You are a loser! Look at yourself! You can't even stand on your feet!" I felt sorry for my father as I watched him sitting with his head down gulping every word my uncle fed him. He had no choice because we needed a place to stay. My father swallowed his pride in order for us to survive. His only defense was to leave whenever he was hurt. My father was the only one in his family who was not doing well in life. He has four brothers and one sister. Even my four-year-old mind understood the way the family treated my father. No one respected him. They treat me like a loser, too, but I learned to be strong and to carry on.

My earliest memory is of my father raising me after my parents were separated. My mother left when I was only two years old. After she left, my father started to drink too much. He was always fighting and angry with someone. Most of the time he took out all of his frustrations on my little brother and me by beating us. He couldn't keep a job and soon we lost everything, including our house.

When we lost our home we began living at my Uncle Eddie's place. We occupied the storage room at the back of his house. The room was so dark; there was not a single window. The floor was rough and filthy. My father spread cardboard from boxes as our mat, for a place to sleep. Weeds were growing on the wall which was made from hollow cinder blocks. I remember falling asleep watching the spiders and lizards playing on the rusty sheet metal ceiling. We lived there until my father had a fight with my uncle.

We were always moving from one place to another. One time, looking for a place, we ended up spending the night at a local military base. My brother and I slept on a table with no pillow or blanket.

A big shock came when my grandmother and auntie took me away from my father and brother.

One afternoon, my grandmother and aunt barged into our room. At that time we were staying with my father's friend. My grandmother firmly stated, "The reason we are here is to take Marilou with us."

My father was stunned. "What? There's no reason that she has to be separated from her brother!"

My grandmother insisted, "She's growing up! It is dangerous for her to be left here alone when you are at work!" My father was alarmed, but was speechless. My brother and I were standing in the corner listening and waiting to see what was going to happen. When I saw my auntie coming toward us I held my brother's hand tightly. As my aunt was getting closer and closer I became more and more terrified. My brother must have felt the same way too and we cried together. My aunt grabbed me and tried to separate me from my brother.

I was screaming, "No! Please, no! I don't want to go!" I was still trying to hold onto my brother while my aunt was forcing me to let go.

"Don't worry! I will take good care of you. You can go to school and I will buy you beautiful dresses, shoes, and a doll too!" My aunt said.

"No! I want to stay with my brother! I want my brother! Please, Auntie! Please!" I pleaded with her as I was trying not to be taken away. I was afraid I would never see him again just like what had happened with my mother. I felt that if my brother and I were together we would be fine.

"I promise we are going to visit your brother often!" My aunt said convincingly. I was still sobbing when I looked at my father and expected him to rescue me, but he just turned his back and carried my brother away.

"Topeeyy!" I cried out calling my brother's name. I watched my brother crying and reaching out to me. He was my only sibling, my only friend, and my

only playmate. I was horrified at my father's reaction. I was mad at him. Why did he always let the family decide everything for us? Why was he giving me away?

I was depressed when I found out how my life would be without my father and brother by my side. Even though I was living with my grandmother, aunt, and her family, I was treated as an outsider and I felt insecure.

I felt emotionally insecure because I wondered when I would see my brother. I missed him so much. My aunt lied to me; she never took me to see my brother or bought me the things she promised'. My grandmother was mean to me, too. She treated me as the runt of the litter. From the young age of five, she loaned me to anyone in the family who needed my help. I had to help whoever was sick or gave birth by babysitting, washing cloth diapers, and cleaning house. I felt like I was a tool being passed around. Sometimes I wondered, "Does my life really matter? Does anyone in the family care about me? Was I ever wanted and loved by my parents?"

I also felt insecure because I never know if there was something for me to eat. My grandma or my aunt would cook special food, but I was not allowed to eat with the rest of the family. I would be left with their scraps or sometimes nothing at all. I would just swallow my saliva every time I served my cousins fine food. Christmas was especially hard for me. I saw my cousins and the neighbor children playing with their new toys, or wearing new clothes and shoes, while there were none for me. I would wait for my parents hoping they would bring toys, dresses, or even shoes for me, but they never came.

I still had fun even though no one would buy me toys. I created my own toys. I made a kite out of old newspaper, using a stick for the frames and cold rice for glue. I made my own paper dolls. I also made a toy car out of sardine cans. I caught dragonflies and fireflies for pets.

I remember my first day of school. I went by myself on foot to public elementary school. I felt unsure about how I looked at school. I had no choice but to wear hand-me-downs from my cousins. The clothes were faded and much too small for me. I wore *kung fu* shoes, cheap black cotton shoes made in China. Every year I had to sew the soles and dye them black again so that I could wear them for another school year.

When I finished elementary school, I was able to attend private high school only because I passed the scholarship exam. In order to keep my scholarship I had to study hard to maintain my grades, but every time I tried to study, I was accused of avoiding my chores. Most of the time I finished my chores so late that there was no time to study. Once, I managed to wake up in the middle of the night to study, but was told to turn off the light to save electricity. Even so, I found a way to study. When everyone was asleep I would go in the back yard and study by candlelight, under the trees, with all the birds and chickens above my head.

During every summer vacation my family put me to work like a carabao, an ox used by the farmers for plowing. My grandmother would wake me up at four in the morning. "Marilou, wake up! You need to be in the market before everybody else! The early bird gets the worm first." I got up, trying to open my still sleepy eyes. I wasn't so sure if it was really time to get up. It was very dark outside and I could not hear the cocks crowing yet. I wished that I could sleep more, even just for another hour. As usual, I never said a word. I changed from my pajamas into my working clothes. While I was changing, my grandmother gave me some instructions. "Here are your lists! One is from your auntie and the other one is from me. And here is the money! Now I want you to be very careful spending, you see the money is budgeted for everything on your list!" I put the money in a small purse and grabbed the market bags.

As I was heading to the market, which was a mile away, I studied the two separate lists to shorten my trip. I went first to the wet market and bought some fish and meat. A wet market in the Philippines is a popular place for selling live fish and really fresh meat. The livestock are slaughtered inside the market. Sometimes I could hear the pigs and other animals crying and screaming. It was horrible in the beginning, but then I got used to it. After the wet market, I went to buy vegetables and groceries. I tried hard to save a little money for the bus fare, but the money was so tight, almost not enough for the market. I filled two bags after I completed my shopping.

Going home was the hardest part. The bags were made of plastic fiber, and were so heavy when full. The sharp plastic handles of the bags cut my hands. Also, because the bags were like a fishnet with many

little holes in it, the fish fins and the sharp cuttings from the meat bones stuck out of the holes of the bags and scratched my legs as I walked. Besides all of the cuts on my hands and legs, my shoulders hurt from carrying the heavy bags. I tried to control my tears from the pain as I watched the blood drip from my legs and hands. When I got home no one even noticed my wounds, or maybe they didn't even care.

Everybody was having their breakfast and I was hoping that they would invite me to have some too. I could smell the fresh baked *pandesal* bread with melted butter on top. My mouth was watering, I was so hungry that I could almost taste it. Suddenly my aunt lifted her head from sipping her coffee and said, "Well, what are you standing there for? You'd better clean those fish and meat in the sink before they stink, and put them in the fridge!" My cousins gave me their oblivious look. I had no choice but to follow her order. My hands stung from all the cuts when I was cleaning the fish and washing the meat, but the growling of my stomach was getting my attention more than the pain from my hands. I couldn't wait to finish my work in the sink. I knew that the table was waiting to be cleared. Even if the dishwashing soap caused me more pain, I didn't mind because I might be lucky and find some leftovers.

I was still munching a piece of bread when I heard my grandmother calling "Marilouuu! Marilouuu!"

"I'm coming Grandma!" I immediately responded.

"Marilouuu!" she called again.

"I'm coming Grandma!" I ran faster.

"Marilouuu! Marilouuu!" my grandma cried incessantly.

"I'm coming Grandma! I'm coming!" I ran to her as fast as I could.

"Oh, there you are! I've been calling you. Why didn't you answer me?" I knew that my grandma had a hearing problem but I preferred not to answer her, to avoid upsetting her more.

"Look, I forgot to put coconut milk on my list, now go back to the market quickly and get me some!"

I told myself "Oh no! Not again!" It wasn't the first time this had happened. Sometimes I would go to the market three times a day. After an hour or more I would come home exhausted from the heat,

but my job was not yet finished. I had to help my grandma prepare *merienda*, an afternoon hot snack such as sticky rice soup, or fried noodles. I sold it while walking around the neighborhood calling out, "*Merienda! Merienda! Merienda!*" In the late afternoon, I made stick brooms out of coconut leaves. I would deliver the brooms to be sold in the market the following morning, before I did my shopping. Every Sunday I made leis and sold them in front of the church. Aside from these routines, I still had to do the work my aunt or my cousins asked of me. I washed the laundry by hand. Their wet clothes were a lot bigger and heavier than I was. I mopped the floor and applied floor wax using my bare hands. Then I would polish the floor by stepping on the coconut husk with my right foot while swinging my leg back and forth.

My grandma made me work hard in her yard, too. She had a big yard with many fruit-bearing trees and animals, like chickens, ducks and dogs. I made chicken houses and pet cages out of bamboo. I cut the bamboo tree with a saw, sliced it into pieces an inch wide and three feet long, then nailed all of the pieces one inch apart to finish the house. I cooked for the animals and cleaned all their cages. Using a bucket, I watered all the plants and trees. At the end of each day I had to fill the water tank using a hand pump.

My grandmother gave me three *pesos* (ten cents) from selling *merienda*, leis, and stick brooms. "I will give you money each day to save for your new school uniform." After she handed me the money, she sat down in her favorite couch and started doing her cross-stitch. For a moment, I wasn't sure if the money was really for me. I only held money when I was asked to buy something, but never for myself. My grandma continued talking to me. "I noticed your clothes are much too small for you. It's your responsibility to keep your money. If you spend it, don't expect me to buy you new clothes! Do you understand me?" I nodded. I knew that my grandma was serious whenever she warned me like this.

I immediately looked for something to recycle and use as my piggy bank. I found an empty plastic container of Johnson's baby powder. The bottle was big enough to hold my money. I cut the bottom of the plastic bottle using a knife. When I inserted the three *pesos* into my piggy bank I had joy in my heart,

believing I could buy my new clothes soon. I was inspired to work harder everyday. Before I went to sleep I would check my piggy bank to feel how heavy it was. I was getting excited because I was close to buying my new clothes, and maybe new shoes too!

A week before school started, I asked my grandma to help me buy my new uniform. In her surprise, she asked me, "Do you have money?" I answered her proudly, "Yes, Grandma!" I ran to get my piggy bank to show her my savings. I dug in my drawer of clothes and looked for the piggy bank, but it wasn't there. I checked again, removing all of the clothes piece by piece from the drawer. My piggy bank was gone! My grandma blamed me for being careless with my savings. I was so sad that I cried myself to sleep every night. I had calculated that over the past two months I had saved one hundred and eighty pesos. I could buy one blouse, one skirt, and a pair of *kung fu* shoes. When someone stole my piggy bank, my dream of wearing a new school uniform was gone.

I was heartbroken, not only because I was wearing my old uniform again but also because I lost my scholarship due to low grades. There were many reasons that I failed to maintain good grades. I was always late for school because I had to finish some of my chores first. I could not afford to take the bus so I had to walk or sometimes run to school. Many times I went all day without food. I was always dizzy from hunger, which made it hard for me to focus on my studies. After I lost my scholarship I stopped going to school. My dream of finishing my studies collapsed. This time I was really devastated. What would I do next? How would I survive?

At the age of sixteen I finally found the courage to run away from home. I started my own life by working as a salesperson for Avon Cosmetics. I worked on a commission basis; if I couldn't sell, then I wouldn't have any money. I rented a small, cheap room with no running water, just a hand pump. Even so, I was so happy to be on my own. However, life was still hard. For example, I got sick from skipping meals, as I was trying to save money to pay my bills and to go back to school. I had to learn to balance eating and working hard.

Just when everything was going fine, Mt. Pinatubo erupted a few kilometers from my home. There was also an earthquake and a typhoon at the same time. My hometown was a disaster; everybody was suf-

fering.

I decided to go to Japan and work there. When I got to Japan I worked as an instructor in social dancing. My life in Japan was difficult, too. I was forced to work long hours and I had only one day off in a month. I walked a long distance to work even in the freezing winter. Finally, I was able to save for my future again. My dreams were coming back.

When I returned to the Philippines, I was able to purchase my first home. I was so proud of myself. I went back and forth to Japan, working and doing some side business. I bought ladies clothing and accessories and took them to Japan to sell.

After a few years, I bought my own business, a fitness center. I learned how to run the business well and made friends with other business owners. They encouraged me and helped me to succeed by showing me my potential. Even bankers became my friends. One day I faced the possibility of losing my business because the property was being sold. I felt trapped and helpless, so I approached one of the fitness club members, who was a banker, and asked his advice.

I learned that he was the regional vice president of the bank. He told me not to worry and he introduced me to the manager of the bank, Miss Medina. He told her that I had a business in our town and would like to buy the land under it. With her help I got a loan from the bank to buy the land. The bankers helped my business grow and I was able to invest in more real estate, such as apartments.

I was busy running the fitness club and traveling to Japan to make more money to help pay my bank loans and to expand my business. But I was still missing something. I wanted to complete my high school education because it would give me self-confidence and would make my life more meaningful.

I was intimidated by going back to school because I was much older than the other students. I had been away from school for twelve years. In the Philippines it is unusual to go back to school after such a long absence. I tried hard to ignore my negative feelings and focused on my studies.

I dedicated my time to my studies. I stopped traveling to Japan. I went to school all day and studied at home at night. I would wake up at four in the morning to study before going to school. In just a year I completed my high school education. I gradu-

ated as valedictorian of my class.

When I was still traveling to Japan, I met the man who was to be my husband. He followed me to the Philippines and I introduced him to my family. He came back every month for a year to court me. That was when I knew he was my true love. After a year or so, we were married and decided to live in Hawaii. My husband showed me the love I had never felt before. I finally felt emotionally secure and I knew where I belonged.

I now have all the things I only dreamt of before. I am now collecting porcelain dolls instead of paper dolls. I drive a new car, rather than playing with a toy car. I travel all over the world and even fly in first class, instead of flying a kite. I have dozens of shoes and beautiful clothes. Most of all, I have the life I have always dreamed of!

My whole world has turned around. My family

and relatives look to me for financial support. My uncles and aunts come for my help whenever they are in a bind. I was able to help my grandmother buy her medications before she died. I support some of my cousins in their studies. I even help my father in his needs. Most of all, I support my brother; I helped him to go back to school. I gained the respect of my family and relatives that I was craving for so long. My father is recognized and respected too. My relatives are so embarrassed about how they treated us that they avoid mentioning anything about the past. I am not bitter towards my relatives because my experiences with them motivated me to succeed. I learned to dream and work hard to reach my goals in life. I have learned that nothing is impossible if I focus on what I want to accomplish. I work in a positive way and then everything else follows. Moreover, being able to share my success is the true success!

