

Other Oceans, Other Motions

For three days, I've been stuck in the crotch of California—Moreno Valley—for a yawn of a conference. The president concludes this “retreat” to a standing ovation; I clap twice and politely duck toward the door. No, colleagues, I don't want to shake hands and dine at a restaurant you love so we can lie to each other about how interesting it was to learn what we already knew. Instead, I'm recycling my lanyard in the bin and tipping the valet extra to sprint. But as I pull away the convention center, I see the standstill on the freeway overpass...cars budge forward...more break lights. At that crawl, I won't make Long Beach until dark.

Coffee.

I need coffee.

Inside 7-Eleven, I fill a cup with dark roast and wait behind a kid with an energy drink. I've always wondered how those things taste but never dared tried one. And especially not after my heart attack in June. He gets ID'd for cheap cigars and from his corduroy shorts, he swings up a chain wallet. The rip of velcro explains he's about twenty-two. Kid's all grin and baseball cap as he bops toward his hatchback and tosses the pack to his girlfriend on the passenger side.

I haven't had a Swisher in years. Without thinking, I order a single and leave 7-Eleven relaxing my tie. Settling inside my silver sedan, I glance toward the freeway onramp. Bumper to bumper. Honks and yells. A mess. I go to push on the engine button but stop.

I search the parking lot for my wife. Even though three hours of congestion separate us, I feel a tinge of guilt because Jen hates when I smoke. I unwrap the cigar and recall when they were shrink-wrapped in clear plastic, not this pink cellophane stuff. The sweet scent of its brown skin takes me back. Way back. Back when I wasn't bald from a mortgage. Back when my under eye bags didn't resemble tombstones from paying two college tuitions. To when my car radio was solely for music, not endless sports chatter and political rants. Behind my tinted windows, I inhale from the Swisher's sugary tip. Yet as I breathe out, I'm returned to a summer night from my early twenties...drinking on a balcony...those brown thighs and sharp eyes—Noelani.

I met Noelani while serving tables across the bay from the Queen Mary. I remember the morning she submitted her application because I had just left Bryce with his mom (my first wife) and I was brewing decaf in the side station when Chauncey dropped a lemon from the slicer. He peeked around the corner toward the front desk and said, "I'd hire that ass on the spot."

To this day, Chauncey's nickname—*The Sampler*—is stuck in my head. He earned it from sleeping with anything that landed on his plate, including a knuckle-throated German tourist with narrow hips who only took it doggystyle. So I didn't pay him any mind and kept on with my opening duties. But then the busser charged through the double doors, dropped the silverware caddy on the counter, and joined Chauncey in the open doorway. Cupping his balls, he whispered, "*Aye, mi corazon.*"

Since the busser was this sometimes-smooth Latin dude, I had to see who this girl was. Being the tallest, I peered over their heads and witnessed this absolute dime with warm skin tone

and jet-black hair. The kitchen window popcorned with white hats as the manager accepted her resume. At the sushi bar she slid into a booth while I studied the plumeria print of her skirt. Those poor flowers were forced into bloom by her thighs. The kind of thick thighs that women fret about in the mirror but men love to squeeze beneath tabletops.

“That’s a bad chick,” Chauncey said.

“The illest,” the busser confirmed.

At first, I thought she was Pinay but the almond shape of her eyes leaned to Hawaiian. Everything about Noelani was looking great until she laughed; the canines in her smile were molar-sized. And slanted. Her lips quickly draped each into hiding.

“Nuh-uh,” Chauncey grunted. “Her grill is jacked.” He scrubbed the air around his mouth. “I can’t do chicks with all this messed up.”

“But you’ll smash a fat chick under the pier?” the busser said.

“I’m saying,” Chauncey said.

“And don’t forget ‘*Heil, Hitler!*’” I said.

The manager shook her hand and the chase was on for the new girl.

The Sampler wasn’t the lead trainer in the restaurant so he didn’t sit alone inside the break room with Noelani on her first day. My heart sped from nerves and free espresso while my vision bounced around the room—from the stacked booster seats to the metal lockers, the Employee of the Month frames to the empty kegs. I was so close to her that I could’ve slid a pinky over her wrist.

“You okay?” she said.

“Hung over,” I lied, my tongue dry as a loofa. I cracked open the training manual, staring

down. “First things first, you need to buy slip-resistant shoes, black socks, and a wine key.”

While explaining the clock-in procedure, I built the courage to lift my gaze and look her in the eye. But each iris was a sea of grassy paint strokes that shored up flecks of sunshine. Immediately my own plain browns plopped back down onto the training manual as if clinging to a raft.

During the tour of the restaurant, I breathed easier, especially as we sampled food in the pantry: crab taquitos, lobster stuffed salmon, macadamia crusted mahi. For dessert, we shared the crème brulee but I was caught off guard by the tip of its chocolate spoon sliding out past her lips. She tilted her head back, the thin muscles in her caramel neck swallowing.

“This is the best thing I ever tasted,” she said nearly moaning.

A dab of the sweet custard remained on her mouth as we carried our dishes to the scullery. Her words “best thing” and “tasted” was on repeat in my head. Luckily, my black apron covered me from embarrassment.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I felt like the trainee because I was the one forgetting ingredients, losing my reading place, dropping my pen. When Noelani went home for the day, I immediately went to the freezer by myself. With no one else around, I unzipped my backpack and stuffed in a quart of milk.

That night, I microwaved dinosaur-shaped nuggets for Bryce. He had recently outgrown the wooden highchair I stole from work but since he’d tip back in his new plastic seat, I had to stabilize the legs by taping on *Chef Boyardee* cans.

His mom was out for the night bartending. We only saw each other between shifts. That was our routine since the divorce and even though it had been finalized for months, all the fees

left us strapped. Seemed like every time I'd get close enough for a deposit on my own apartment, my car needed brake pads or we were late on Bryce's tuition.

He dipped a pterodactyl into a ramekin. "Wha wrong, Daddy?"

"Tired," I said.

He bit a dinosaur's left wing.

"Wan to whach Elmo-pa-woo-ah?"

No matter who watched Bryce, he had to watch *Elmopalooza*.

"Later," I promised.

He looked at me. "When mommee comin home?"

"Drink your milk."

"Can I have i'creem?"

Dishes stood in the holder. She washed them—I put them away.

"Finish those raisins," I said. "Mommy said you didn't poo. You gotta poo, dude."

He chomped off the head from a Tyrannosaurus Rex. "Can I sleep on cowch witchu?"

After we showered, he ate mint chip ice cream while watching his favorite show. Never the type of kid to sing aloud, Bryce would move his lips along instead. But sometimes, he'd whisper the chorus with Elmo that went, "Be yourself...Easy as A-B-C...Can't be no one else...Just happy to be me!"

For the sake of Noelani, I should have listened to Elmo.

When I saw her the next day, I kept it by the book and quizzed her on table numbers and entrée pairings. But as we chatted about other stuff, I found out Noelani had played college volleyball until her ACL tore—surgery, rehab, all that—yet she was a year away from teaching

elementary school. I could have told her that my son was entering kindergarten and continued the conversation in that direction but she commented on my height and asked if I played volleyball.

“Snowboarding’s my thing.”

She shook her head.

“Skiing?” I threw out.

“I don’t...I don’t do mountains.”

“Are you joking?” I said.

“They’re my phobia,” she said. “There’s some special name for it.”

“Really?”

“I swear. Say when I see them in a magazine, I whip the page. Or when I drive somewhere far, I map it out around them.”

“That’s weird,” I said. “I mean, different.”

She said, “Did you ever see that movie about that airplane that crashed into a mountain? The one where the survivors ate their dead to stay alive?”

I nodded even though the only movies I watched were *Bedtime with Elmo* and *Elmo’s Potty Time*.

“My teammates freaked during the scene when the passengers were cutting chunks of frozen ass,” Noelani said. “But the whole time I was in that theater covering my eyes—those mountains were ginormous!”

I thought about my own hang up. For whatever reason, I couldn’t carry Bryce along the edge of a high surface for fear my arms would involuntarily throw him.

But what we connected on was Hip Hop. She’d been to more live shows than I owned burned CDs because while growing up in Hawaii, she had helped her older brother carry record

crates into house parties across the islands. He never spun for radio stations but instead cracked into Vegas clubs, banking six-figures a year without a high school diploma. Hearing about the emcees she had met backstage, my crush on her boosted since at that time—turn of the 90s—to find a nonblack girl who was deep into Hip Hop was the equivalent of a woman scoring a guy who hates sports but just *loves* musicals.

Noelani certified her training. After shifts, while everyone else was drinking their tips in a pub, we were in her car head nodding to break beats and arguing about what mattered most in lyrics: skill or emotion. I rifled through her CD visor when she passed me a picture of her brother in his backyard holding a Corona. She pointed at everything he bartered from working private gigs—patio, fence, pool. But I kept staring at his face. In comparison to her, he was almost pale.

“Your bro looks,” I said, “lighter than you.”

“We’re hapa haole.”

“Happy who?”

Noelani’s incisors showed.

“‘Hapa haole’ means we’re mixed. My mom’s from the main island but my dad’s German. That’s how I got these.” She batted her gems then slid in a CD. As I listened to her brother scratching the wax, my finger pads rubbed the top of my knees to copy his fast hands.

Looking back now, I should have mentioned my situation to Noelani. But at twenty-one years old, to have to admit you’re a divorced parent—still living with the kid’s mother—borders on you disclosing cancer. When do you tell? If you lay your cards flat during the first conversation, they fold up and—*pyung!*—ditch you on the dance floor holding the drink you bought them.

During one of our private kickbacks in the empty parking lot, I was determined to tell

Noelani about Bryce. But that was the first night we kissed. As I nibbled on her lower lip, the thought nagged me until I pulled my hand out from beneath her sweatshirt.

“What’s up?” she said, adjusting her strap.

“Something I want to say real quick.”

I looked deep into Noelani’s eyes and as I was about to come clean, I lost my nerve in the sheen of her black hair. Black as a record. Like you could run your fingers through it and sample every track in her heart: the quiet slow jam, the up-tempo R&B cut, the underground classic.

“There’s a party Friday night,” I said instead. “Wanna go?”

The night of the party, I stood in full uniform inside my living room while telling Bryce’s mom that I had picked up a shift. I then drove to the gas station to change into my jeans, stuffing the car seat inside the trunk. While I checked my hair in the rearview, the night hid the melted crayons on the floorboard.

I picked up Noelani and as soon as we entered the party, smoke hit us in the face. The host was travelling to Europe and wanted to survive their dance clubs so he bought two boxes for everyone to smoke. Near the bookcase, the high schoolers coughed like crazy but the pros in the hallway chimneyed three at a time.

First thing Noelani said: “I can’t be in here.”

“Too smoky?” I said.

She grabbed my arm, stared at the carpet.

I told her I hated cigarettes, too. That it was like inhaling cardboard.

“Get me out,” she said.

I had never seen her act that way so I scanned the room. Nicotine clouds hovered beneath

the red ceiling bulbs. But through the haze, above the futon, I saw what bothered her—a painting of Catalina.

“That’s not a mountain,” I told Noelani. “That’s an island near here. It’s like Long Beach’s version of Hawaii.”

She shut her eyes, clamped my forearm. I placed her hand inside mine. I guided her to a narrow balcony outside: two lawn chairs, a string of white lights, cactus pot with a *Sublime* sticker.

“Need a drink?” I said.

She cracked her knuckles.

“Hold tight,” I said.

I coursed back through the party. The smoke was thick and chewy as the pot brownies disappearing from the kitchen counter. I stirred two vodka-crans and tasted my finger, wondering when to tell Noelani about Bryce. In a year, I’d be out of the apartment from his mom. The ice cubes cracked as I imagined Noelani moving in with us. Adding more vodka, I envisioned the three of us eating cookie dough and watching Elmo.

I couldn’t have been away from Noelani for no more than two minutes and guys had her surrounded like vultures. But one mention of the disappearing magic brownies and the small balcony cleared again.

“Uhhh!” Noelani said, followed by a sip. “That guy who was here, Breathasaurus, melted my mind when he bragged about his hundred-dollar tip. I had to lift my arm and smell my own deodorant.”

She pulled from her purse a pack of strawberry Swishers. We traded drags on the girly smoke and I chuckled because I had never lit one up without gutting the tobacco and relining the

belly with weed. But I'd given up on smoking herb when Bryce was born; I needed money in the worst way then.

Noelani and I ashed that first one and the scent blended in with the warm night. My buzz intact, details stood out at that moment. Noelani's face was neon green from a text message. Her chin tilted down, I stared at her shiny brown shoulders jutting out her black tank top like a bonus pair of small titties. She kicked her pink suede Pumas on the stucco banister, her jean shorts dangling white threads. She had premature thick momma-thighs and the only distraction from the yellow turtle inked above her ankle was the low banister, easy enough to step over. I wouldn't have dared held Bryce on that balcony.

"My old team is in town for a weekend tournament," she relayed. Her thin fingers attacking the little letters. "You have to meet them!"

First the friends, then the family.

"No doubt," I said. "Your cup looks low."

As I stood up, I touch her shoulder. I just had to.

I came back with a half-bottle of vodka and juice. We turned our lawn chairs towards each other and began to freestyle to the music.

Before that night, she and I had passed the time at work by scribbling rhymes in our server pads trailed by *dot-dot-dot* for the other to complete. The rhymes were about anything. Dumber the better. I remember she wrote about an obese momma in a muumuu tucking lard pancakes in her armpit-pantry. Then, the rhyme hit a corner and we went back and forth about a drunk drowning in the Pacific Ocean while downing a six-pack of Pacifico.

But since we were freestyling for the first time on the spot, we resorted that night to the simple style of Southern rap. 'Err had to end everything

Noelani's went: "I wave my Swisher in the 'err. Like I just don't k'err. So please don't st'err or you might get sc'err'd."

Afterwards, her hands caved around her mouth to kick the cutest little beatbox. But as I took over the rhyme, her bare thighs between my jeans tripped my tongue.

"Wick-wick-whack," she teased, fingers flicking across invisible wax. "Wick-a-wick-whack."

She giggled like a girlfriend with a secret and inhaled the Swisher, the skin on her clavicle sinking deep. The smoke drifted toward the pier where diehard fishermen huddled beneath lampposts.

The sliding glass door behind us wiggled with bass and everyone inside was grooving. The foggy red light gave the room a soupy appearance. As if our coworkers were ingredients shifting inside a bowl of Manhattan chowder. For all I cared, they could have partying in Manhattan and viewing us on giant screens because at that instant my big moment had arrived.

"Noelani," I started. "I'm feeling you to a deep degree and—"

A fire truck turned the corner. Lights spinning, siren blaring.

An upstairs neighbor had thought the complex was on fire.

Party over.

Noelani nor I could drive but the warm night was perfect for a stroll. With a corner-mall next door to the party, we were a hop, skip and a *Jack In The Box* from the beach. Curly fry scent in the air, the salty winds passing through the palm trees melted the ice inside our red cups. We held hands mitten-style, my thumb stroking her palm, as we journeyed beneath a sliced moon toward the bar. I was excited because upon our arrival, her friends—future bridesmaids—would

bear witness to our interlaced fingers.

I had envisioned Noelani holding more than my hand since her maiden name was horrible to the ear: Hortchenberger or Hitlervragen. During the previous brunch shift, I had watched her face squint as she landed Mimosas on her tray and hurried toward a large reservation. The ocean glistened around her form while she listed the cuts from the carving table. The guests were smiling up at her from their seats and I imagined her standing before Bryce's kindergarten class. I could even hear his small classmates greeting her in unison: "Hell-lo Miss-es Va-len-te!"

We were blocks from the bar as my knuckles slid down the moist lanes of her hand. A full squeeze and I said, "Can I tell you something?"

Noelani nodded as I explained everything, my practiced words spilling out like cereal.

But after a look of serious contemplation, she released my hand. "You-are-a-committed-father," she said, trying to hide her drunken lisp, sounding like a robotic telemarketer. "That-is-great-to-hear. Very-honorable-of-you."

Bla bla bla, yadda yadda yeah—I had heard it all before.

She walked ahead to the bar, turned to me at the door.

"James, this is like...weird. You have this whole other world to you I never knew about."

Noelani hung out with her teammates while I found a barstool. I plunged quarter after quarter into a Trivia machine I've never been good at. She introduced me to her friends, including a Brazilian beach player in a zipped up Adidas sweatshirt. He was square in the shoulders as the pool table they played on.

When the bartender said last call, I hoped Noelani would come to her senses and walk with me so we could talk more outside.

But it was too late because Noelani was grinding against the pro volleyball player. Her

eyes were closed and her lips were sucked inside her mouth. To top it all off, they were dancing next to a Coors Light poster and Noelani was oblivious to the Rocky Mountains stretched to the ceiling. The Long Island in my hand slipped to become a long puddle.

Chauncey agreed to pick my drunk ass up since I promised to buy him a turkey sandwich at work. Rolling down PCH on the drive to his place, I shoved my head out the window toward the waves and screamed my love for Noelani.

“You’re retarded,” he complained. “Other oceans, other motions.”

“You don’t understand,” I blabbered. “You don’t understa-*a-a*-nd!”

Inside his apartment, Chauncey guided me into his bathroom and left me to wobble in the dark. Splashing pee all over the tile. I plopped down on the soaked seat while my mind replayed the worst part of that night: another guy taking away my girl.

While lost in agony, I thought of Bryce. He was just starting to walk when I took him to the Queen Mary for the first time. He lifted his hands because he wanted to see over the edge of the ship but I told him no. But then I felt ridiculous for my paranoid thoughts so I picked him up and brought him to the edge of the cruise liner. As he peeked at the ocean water hundreds of feet below, I felt instantly sick. Because in my mind, I was preparing to throw him overboard. Or an earthquake was about to shove me against the banister and my instincts would drop whatever I had in my hands.

But then I imagined I was Bryce being held by Noelani. Instead of gripping me tight, she flung me away, gravity stealing me from her world. That was the moment I teetered from Chauncey’s toilet and landed into his bathtub.

“Fuck Noelani!” I yelled, shoving the shower curtain from my face. “That snaggletooth bitch!”

“Quiet!” Chauncey said, flipping the brightest light ever. “Don’t wake my roommate.”

Chauncey let me fall asleep there. My jeans were drenched.

After that night, Noelani and I stopped scribbling to each other. No more hangouts in her car either. She quit months later and I skipped her bon voyage party. Heard it was fun—luau theme, beer pong—but I was checking off school supplies at the ninety-cent store for Bryce’s school.

From that point forward, I was upfront with women since I knew they’d find out I had a kid anyways. So on my second date with Jen, I explained, “Okay, here’s my deal.”

She listened intently, more so than Noelani had, and for a moment, I lost track of my thoughts. A hard truth was unfolding before me: boy tells girl about son, boy loses girl, after girl after girl after girl—enduring the scratch in his life’s record—until his son turns eighteen and marries a sweet girl before dear old dad can.

I stopped talking and braced for Jen’s rejection. Instead she told me about her daughter who was a few months older than Bryce. Years later down the line, so the story goes, we tied the knot. Friends and family know us as the downsized Brady Bunch. I have to admit, nothing’s been perfect but our form of imperfect has suited us just fine.

My phone’s ringing now, returning me to my car. Caller ID says it’s Jen.

“Ugh,” I answer.

“I hear you,” she says. “I picked up a rotisserie chicken. Want me to pack your lunch for tomorrow?”

Across the parking lot, I notice the young couple in the hatchback. Their windows are rolled up. The boy passes the Swisher to the girl.

“Sure,” I say near whisper.

“I bought avocados for guacamole,” Jen says. “I’ll put in Tapatio.”

They’re hot boxing and I forget to respond. “Good,” I throw in.

“It’s been a long week,” Jen says. “But Sunday should be fun.”

I’m quiet. Clueless. What’s Sunday? Anniversary?

She reads my mind.

“Sunday is Father’s Day,” she reminds me. “Hey, you okay?”

The cigar heats my fingertips.

“I hate traffic.”

“Roll down your windows, stay awake. When you get here, I’ll light the massage candle and open a bottle.”

She knows me so well. This is why I love her. I tell her so and we get off the phone.

I roll the cigar between my fingertips feeling lightheaded and unusually okay about my life. Now ready to battle this mess on the road, I take a final puff and flip the nub onto the cement. But while holding in the smoke, my mind slips back to that balcony...Noelani...the drinks...salty air.

My chest burns.

I blow smoke from my life’s final Swisher then sip my hot coffee. I push the engine button. I blend into the traffic.