

## The Landlord

When the conditions are right, No Can Tells is one of the best, most dangerous waves you can think of. The wave itself is gnarly—it's thick, and moves so fast the lip slams down hard enough that you can hear the crash halfway through the paddle out. But that's not even the scariest part. The waves don't just slam you down, they bury you in three feet of water on top of razor-sharp reef. You can get cut to shreds or get some part of your body stuck in the reef and drown. And since you have to paddle out a football field to get there, you're fucked if you eat it. Still yet, that's not the scariest part of No Cans. At least not to me. While you wait for the sets to roll in, you have to sit in an open-ocean channel that's too deep to see the bottom, even when the water is perfectly clear. There's all sorts of animals down there. The Landlord is the only one you gotta keep an eye out for though. I learned to scope out the channel for him before I go into the lineup after seeing so many half-bitten boards and scars. I can only imagine him torpedoing upwards to a couple of dangling legs –

“I don't know why people are so pissed about it,” Reid said, rescuing me from all the scenarios of shark-attacks that run through my head every time I paddle out here. It was too early for a normal person to want to talk, but Reid had the same energy at five AM that he had at five PM.

“It's a big part of island history that's why. Cannot just re-write Hawaiian culture after a couple drawings.”

Reid laughed. “First,” he said, “the evidence is a little more than just ‘a couple drawings.’ Second, I’m not stupid, I know how important the Naha Stone is. I’m just glad our town can be a part of that history now.”

“Just paddle already.”

I heard the first crash up ahead and had to get my mind right before I got out there. The sun wasn’t on the horizon yet. Just a couple of streaks that shot in all directions across the red-gray morning sky. But when the waves are like this, there’s no place I’d rather be at any time of day.

Reid and I sat at the mouth of the channel, before it opens up onto the coral shelf where all the waves break. It was clear and glassy, easy six foot swells. And it was still only low tide. Reid rushed out, charging the first wave of the day. He took off a little too late and was sucked up and over the falls. His head popped up in time for him to dive under the next wave in the set. I still sat on the side, sizing it all up.

I looked down into the channel. Aside from a couple puffer fish and the usual reef-dwellers, there wasn’t much to see. Apparently it didn’t bother Reid, but I liked to know where the Landlord was, so I knew where I shouldn’t be. So I waited.

Reid took off on another wave and made the drop. The wave throws pretty hard, so the barrel is wide enough to park your car into. Reid stuck his hand into the tube wall, slowing him down, making him sink deeper into the barrel. He let go, but the wave already started to outrun him, and it collapsed on top of him. His head popped up again.

Beneath the surface there was still no movement that concerned me. The Landlord was nowhere in sight. It made sense that he would be so aggressive out here; here’s a spot in the

middle of a reef where only a handful of people ever go to, and it's abundant with life. So when the few surfers who know No Cans go out, I understand why he'd be pissed. One time our friend Ian came out to go diving and tried to feed the Landlord the fish he was gonna throw back. But he didn't eat them. He circled around them, gave a poke or two, and went on his way.

"You wanna take pictures then? If you're not gonna surf you might as well," Reid said paddling over to me. I went out for the first wave I could.

The most critical part of the wave is not when it breaks, it's right before it. When the wave breaks, there isn't anything you can do. You either caught it or you didn't. But the moment right before it breaks is when you know you're gonna make the drop or not. A set started to roll in. I took off.

My arms pumped through the water, and just as it started to break, I stood up, cutting and carving across it. Whatever the water was doing, I countered. Slowing down when it sped up. I'd let it carry me, and then I took control. It's an art, a fluidity of motion under extreme conditions and being able to respond to the ocean's command every second. I cut back and started gaining speed, letting the water push me forward. As soon as my legs started to shake from the speed, I leaned back towards the wave and boosted up off the top of the lip. When I looked out the water, I saw Reid laughing and clapping, yelling something I couldn't hear over the noise of the water. He started to paddle over since there was a lull in the set.

As soon as he got close he stopped, his face dropping. Immediately I yanked my feet as close to the surface as I could and looked down. I thought for sure he'd be underneath me. Nothing. Reid just laughed and splashed water in my direction.

“Brah fuck this, I’m out,” I said, refusing to be a part of it all. Reid stayed out a little longer and I just went back to shore. I had to wait a bit for him to meet me there, but it was minor. It was his fault for cutting our Dawn Patrol session short.

“Why are you so scared of the Landlord?” He asked, sitting next to me on the sand.

“Get real, act like you’re not.”

“Yeah, but I thought the shark was your aumakua, so isn’t it a good sign to see the Landlord?”

“Sharks don’t care who you are or where you come from, they eat you if they want to. You think the Landlord knows he’s supposed to protect me? I think he just eats when he’s hungry and that’s about it.”

“All right, take it easy, let’s go then. I could go for a nap anyway.” We headed to the showers on the beach to rinse off the salt. Sand dripped off our boards into wet, gloopy piles on the ground as we rinsed them off. The radio was playing “Waimanalo Blues” when I started the car. Reid interrupted the song when we pulled onto the road.

“So I take it you’re pissed about the Naha Stone moving out here too then.”

“Driving.” But Reid knew that trick, and was unfazed.

“All I’m saying is explain why. Give me more negatives than positives and I’ll leave it alone.”

“What positives? It’s *only* negatives.”

“Oh forreal? I guess the town having more jobs and more money is a bad thing then.”

“Tell me how more money is coming to Pohakupu,” I said.

“With the Naha Stone moving here now, all the tourists will come over to see it, and with the Tiki Grill opening tonight –”

“Exactly, more people. More fuckin’ kooks to crowd the streets. Can’t wait for traffic too, brah, heard it’s the best.” Reid laughed, like he always did when things got a little tense.

“Look,” he said, “there’s gonna be some shitty parts, nobody is denying that. But what are we gonna do? Sit around and bitch about it while everyone else here reaps the benefits? I’d rather accept it and make the best of it instead of fighting something you can’t stop.”

“Why are we even talking about this still? It’s six in the morning and it’s all everyone has been talking about. I’m tired of talking about it. It’s shit, and I’m not cool with it, pau already.”

“Easy, Kimo. I get it.”

I turned the radio up. Exodus by Bob Marley. Halfway through the song, Reid turned it down again.

“You gonna eat at the Tiki Grill with your mom tonight? Grand opening, should be nuts.”

“Brah how about you go with her since you guys both love all this.” The volume went up until we stopped at his house.

“Shoots then,” Reid said, getting out the car, “call me later, I’m gonna crash. Let’s go back out this afternoon when the tide comes in.”

“Shoots.” A part of me felt bad for snapping at him, but he should’ve known better and just dropped it, especially after his little prank. Whatever though, he’d be over it by the time we went out again. I pulled up to the house and saw mom stirring in the kitchen through the front window. I walked inside, straight past her and into my room. A knock came right after.

“Where were you so early?” She asked.

“Surf.”

“How was it?”

“Fine.”

I avoided eye contact, picking up clothes and putting them somewhere else.

“Well now that I have you here, are you coming to dinner with me tonight? I’d like you to.”

“Don’t know. Might be busy.”

“Ok,” she sighed, patience noticeably wearing thin, “just let me know when you do.”

“K.”

I sat in my room until I heard mom’s ignition as she left for work. The early wakeup caught up to me while I was watching TV, and I dozed off.

Back at No Cans it was perfect conditions. No wind, no current to swim through, the sun was bright so I could see everything in the water, and above me glassy ten foot swells were rolling through. I looked up to see if people were around, but from where I was I couldn’t see anyone. Good. Just me and my reef. A set was coming in, building momentum for what seemed like weeks. It was slowly rolling up to where I was, and then it picked up speed right before it broke. I started swimming as fast as I could, but the wave was huge. There was one deafening moment before it broke where I looked down. I’d never been up out of the water like that. This monstrous wave was about to crash on the reef, and I was either going to make the drop or get slammed. It started to break. There was a low rumble, and I clenched my teeth so hard I could feel the cartilage in my face tear. Just as I was about to hit the reef, another rumble.

My head twitched up and I grabbed my phone, vibrating on the table next to me. One new message received, from mom, dinner is at seven if you're coming. I was wide awake now. Reid was probably still sleeping, and I was too restless to sit around the house. So I walked into town.

Even at seven in the morning Pohakupu was buzzing with excitement. People were trying to find a way into the Naha Stone exhibit to snap pictures of it, and the finishing touches for the new Tiki Grill were overseen by frantic, worried-looking guys. Apparently Pohakupu is where King Kamehameha actually lifted the rock, proving that he was the ruler of Hawai'i. Someone stumbled upon some hieroglyphics I guess, and after a lot of tests were done, everyone agreed that Kamehameha the Great lifted the rock in Pohakupu (to show how heavy the rock was, he had a bunch of his servants carry it from here to the town over, where people thought he lifted it first). Of course, the whole town erupted with pride. And tourism. All the tourists who usually just passed through to get to the Naha Stone lingered around now. I kept walking, stunned by all the signs that shot out of store windows with huge numbers and small letters: "\$5.99! Opening day sale! Get Naha Stoned!" It was bad enough that the rock was moving here to attract tourists, but now people are giving them reasons to stay. The biggest one, obviously, was the Tiki Grill. Everyone was talking about the grill, and mom managed to get reservations on opening night. Still, I didn't want to give in. I didn't want people to change my Pohakupu.

Bored and pissed, I called Reid.

"That was quick," he said with a yawn. "Just give me a minute to eat."

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We got to the beach, and from the shore we could see No Cans going off. Since you “no can tell” anyone about the break, nobody was ever out except me, Reid, and a couple of our friends who know the spot. We basically had the break to ourselves most of the time. We started paddling out again.

“Think I should go dinner tonight?”

Reid laughed and kept paddling. That meant yes.

“The waves are nuts right now.” Reid yawned in agreement, still waking up. The water *was* nuts though. The sun was up with the tide, the water puffing into proud blues and greens. We heard the pounding waves from the shore, and they only got louder as we paddled more. I went straight into the lineup and took off on the first wave.

I carved up and down the wave, whipping my body with each movement, until I dug my hand in the face of the wave and slowed into the barrel. Water raced up and over my head all around me and I pumped my board and leaned forward to gain speed. The wave was so thick that when it closed, all the air shot out in a violent burst. Reid was clapping on the side. As soon as he saw me get spit out, he started paddling for the next one. It jacked up bigger than either of us expected, and Reid pulled out while he had the chance. I took off again.

Reid was yelling and flailing his arms over his head, but I ignored him. I had to catch this wave. I hesitated on the drop, but the body of the wave transformed from a lumbering mound into a straight cliff so fast I couldn't pull out. I hit a bump and flew into the reef. My body hit the shelf. The wind was knocked out of me and my back and thighs got chewed up. Everything stung, like I just jumped into a crowd of jellyfish. Pieces of flesh hung on to thin strips of skin



that you couldn't see through the blood. I thought *The more I struggle, the more air I lose*, so I held onto the breath I still had and tumbled underneath the wave. But it kept churning and holding me down on top of the reef until I let out one last gasp and jumped up and drank in as much air as I could possibly fit in one breath. When I was able to see, the next wave was right on top of me and I ducked underneath. I swam as hard as I could against the underwater force, my board dragging behind me, sucking me back into the wave. But it finally let me up to breathe. Reid was there when I emerged.

"I'm all right," I said after a long pause of coughing.

"That was a pretty big spill there, brah, we should probably cruise it for a bit."

"Fuck," I said, still coughing, "I should've listened. That wave was way too big."

"It was a big wave, but when I was waving at you, it wasn't that. The Landlord was right beneath you."

I immediately looked down, and sure enough, he was close by. I thought about the cuts, but the Landlord didn't seem interested in me at all. He didn't even get that close to the surface. Reid broke the silence.

"What do you wanna do then, Kimo? I'm down to stay if you want to, but this is a little too nuts for me, so I'll just be out by the channel."

I was fixed on the Landlord, even though he wasn't really doing anything. "Nah I'm coming. Let's bounce."

Each stroke was painful. I had to take breaks every now and then to rest.

"Reid, come check out the cuts real quick. Are they bad? Like, hospital kine bad?"

“Holy shit,” Reid said, his face turning completely serious, “I’ve never seen something like this before.”

“Forreal? Fuck I can feel them burning, we gotta get to the ER.”

He kept staring at the cuts. “I’ve never seen so much blood...come from such small cuts.” Reid broke out into laughter.

“Ho funny guy, got all the jokes now.” I didn’t talk to him until we got back on shore.

“What’s up with these short little sessions today, Bleedy?” Reid kept laughing, and I had to give in.

“I know, seriously. I love No Cans,” I said, trying to change the subject, “but it’s such a retarded place to surf sometimes. It’s like, the best wave that gets ruined because the reef. If there wasn’t any, it would be so perfs.”

“I don’t know. The wave wouldn’t break like that if there wasn’t any reef. I’m just glad it breaks at all.”

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We got back to the house, both of us not realizing how hungry we were until we parked. Reid went straight to the kitchen while I unloaded our boards. He had everything for breakfast burritos out by the time I walked inside.

“Look at you, grinding all the spam in the house.”

“Unlike you,” Reid muffled through a mouthful, “I’m not going to the Tiki Grill tonight. I gotta take advantage. Speaking of which, what are you gonna order?” Reid tossed me a menu.

“What is this?”

“Since so many people wanted reservations, they gave out menus to everyone so they could know what to order by the time they got there. Just read it.”

Reid munched away. I went up and down the menu, throwing it on the floor.

“I’m not going.”

“What? How come?” Reid picked it up and started to read it.

“Look at this,” I said, pushing the menu to his face. “Kameha-Mayhem? Lili’uoka-Lambchops? The Eddie Aikau-abunga Burger? This is what I’m talking about, brah, they come and just try make money off Hawaiian culture.”

“Relax, it’s just a restaurant. The names are kinda funny too if you think about it.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand —” I stopped, immediately regretting those words.

“Forreal? Why’s that?” He was pissed.

“Let’s just watch some TV.” Reid finished the last bite of his burrito, stared down for a bit, then snapped.

“Look Kimo, I’ve been putting up with your pussy little mood-swings for the past month. And I haven’t said anything about it ‘cause I know you’re not getting along with your mom and shit. And for what? All because you’re pissed that other people will come to *your* town. What, so we should all pay you rent now? What the fuck is your deal?”

“It’s not just that people are coming here. It’s why. They come here and try to make money off my—our—culture. Are you blind?”

“No, I fuckin’ see it, Kimo. It was bound to happen one day, and it sucks. But you can either sit here and punish everyone for it, or accept it and make the best of it. And don’t give me

the ‘culture’ lecture. You’re so scared of your own aumakua that you won’t stay out at No Cans. So what, your culture means a lot to you when it’s convenient, ah?”

“When the development starts happening, it’ll be too late. But it hasn’t started yet, and right now we can choose to let it happen or not. Probably doesn’t bother you, they’re just finishing what your family already started.”

“Fuck you, I’m out. Call me later when your ma‘i is done this month.”

A rush of wind followed him out the door. Fuck! He had no right to just eat my food and bounce. Who does he think he is? Giving me lectures. Him and mom, I don’t know what the deal is, they should get what I’m saying but they don’t. And it’s weird, too, ‘cause they always had my back it seemed.

I needed to clear my head. Reid was right about one thing, at least. I needed to go out to No Cans and get over being scared. I cruised for a bit at my house until I was too restless.

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Fear grows with time. I remember a story about Eddie Aikau, that he was surfing on a huge, twenty-foot day at Waimea. He got wrecked on a wave and blacked out underwater. He woke up on the shore with a concussion, not even sure how he got there. He jumped up and went back out, and when the lifeguard who saved him asked him why, he said he had to conquer his fear when it was still young and weak or else he wouldn’t be able to beat it later. I did too. The cuts still hurt, and visions of me bullied into the reef from last time kept playing in my mind as I

paddled out. Kamehameha had to have envisioned failure so many times before he managed to lift the Naha Stone, too. But he went out.

I didn't look for the Landlord, just paddled straight into the break. I was selective about my wave choice, ducking under the bigger sets and bailing my board when I hit a bump. Baby steps though. A lull in the sets came, and I couldn't help but look down. I saw the Landlord, letting the currents hold him, as two feeder fish were picking at his teeth. The fish were taking all they could from the Landlord, just trying to eat. But they were cleaning him. Part of me wanted him to lash out and eat those fuckin' fish. They were only there for a free meal. And it was his reef.

But he didn't. He could've so easy, but he just dangled in the ocean, swaying back and forth slowly. I left my board on the surface and tied the leash to some coral. He was too deep to swim to, even if I wanted to swim to him, but I knew I had to be in the water with him, as close to his level as I could. I never actually saw him attack anything before, but he was just so huge you knew he could if he wanted. Plus this was *his* reef. I was just visiting. Small air bubbles tickled my face as I dove down. The salty burn of the water on my eyes stopped me for a second. When the burn was gone, the feeder fish already darted off at the sound of me splashing into the ocean, leaving small, winding jet streams behind. Glimmered rays from the sun marched slowly over the Landlord's spotted back, bending and expanding across his fin. He was still rocking gently in the same place. The surface picked up and started pounding, but the Landlord's presence seemed to interrupt all the noise above us. Just him being still was enough to feel his mana. I felt tethered to him. I pumped my arms as smooth and relaxed as I could to get closer, but the warm water felt stiff against my body and I struggled to stay under. He slashed upward in

a short burst, his muscular chassis cutting through the space between us. He glided closer, at a curious pace, but I could barely make him out now. Salt gnawed on my eyeballs and sharp heat jabbed my lungs. He was like the shadow of a cloud now, rolling towards me, faster all of a sudden. Right as my mouth burst open with air, I had a flash of clarity, the kind of flash that becomes longer each time you remember it.

He stopped abruptly, about a longboard's length away, fanning a wall of water that enveloped me for what seemed like hours. I was suspended in a cocoon of moving water below the surface, between the churning troughs of the waves above me and the Landlord. He was barely moving. Just drifting. Looking curiously at this awkward intruder in front of him, unsure of what he should do, of what he wanted to do. My heart pounded and my lungs throbbed, but I couldn't move. My body screamed at me, but part of me wanted to stay, for as long as I could. Behind the rows of teeth and scarred, rounded snout in front of me, it was so peaceful down there, like nothing had ever changed. He writhed in an S motion towards me and air bubbles burst from my mouth. In my mind, the last thing I saw was a rising darkness behind him as he opened his jaw.

I was swimming upwards now, inhaling small gulps of the ocean. I felt a force on my leg – not sharp or painful, but smooth, exact. Powerful. I flailed until I broke the surface seal. I could still feel him there. He was close.

I wiped my eyes and stole as much air as I could with each breath. I yanked my legs up and looked through the ocean to see where he was. But he was gone. I could barely make out the large, pointed shadow plunging into the deep. I wish I had a watch real quick, I was out here for forever it seemed. But everything looked the same up here; the shifting blues and greens of the

water compromising each other's identity, the dancing glare of the sunrays retreating from the audience of clouds. All the same as it was when I paddled out. Still breathing heavy, I looked around to see where I was. No Cans was still firing, even bigger than before, but someone pushed the break away from me while I was gone. Good thing, too. If I was caught in the middle of those sets I would've been slammed for sure. I swam back to the reef I leashed my board to, but it snapped off in the surf, leaving Velcro strangle marks on its orange-brown neck. The channel back to shore was a long swim, and the cuts on my back still throbbed in the saltwater. So I let the currents roll me towards the shore. I knew what was there waiting for me in my town when I got back. Nothing changed since I paddled out. Maybe it's a little less my town now. I'll just drift then.