

Sweet Breath to the Illest

All day I've been stuck in the crotch of California—Moreno Valley—for a yawn of a conference. Now that it's done, I drop my lanyard in the recycler, shake the necessary hands and duck out before colleagues invite me to dinner. I'm beat down and want to get home but the freeway up the street is bumper to bumper. Cars budge forward...then stop...few more feet... break lights. At that crawl, I won't make Long Beach for three hours so I head inside 7/11 for coffee.

“How much,” this homeless guy says, “for hot dog buns and ketchup?”

“Sir,” the cashier shoots back, “hotdogs are purchased with the bun.”

“Yeah, but uhh, see here, that's the thing. I don't want two hot dogs. I want two *buns* and ketchup. One for me, one for my son.”

“No hotdog, no buns.”

Quarters and dimes clink the counter. “Well then, how much for one bun?”

“Get out!”

“Come on. My little man needs something to eat!”

I shake my head, squeeze my leather wallet. Hearing this homeless guy pains me; he reminds me of my broke days while raising Bryce. My boy had to be three-years old and we'd sit

at the jetty for hours fishing with bait left behind on the boulders. If that didn't work, we'd eat another bowl of cereal inside the studio.

“Get out or I'm calling the cops!”

The serenity prayer under my breath is not working. Heart pounding, my blood pressure is through the roof. Dizzy for sleep, I flash my payment card. “Here,” I interrupt, “give him two hotdogs, keep this line moving.”

The homeless guy blesses me over and over. His torn shoes scrape his BO out the door and I feel decent about myself, something to tell Jen about. But as he crosses the street, I'll be damned if he's not eating both hotdogs by himself. He wipes his mouth then enters AM/PM, probably to pull the same hustle.

Oh well—one more customer and I'm on my way.

The kid before me is twenty-two, twenty-three maybe. Thick hair, jean shorts, chain wallet. When he asks for strawberry Swishers, my ears pique. I haven't smoked one of those in years. Hell, decades. The kid bops out 7/11 and tosses the pack to his girlfriend on the passenger side. Her squeal comes through the window. She kisses his cheek and he's all grin and baseball cap while pulling out the lot.

“Grab me a Swisher, too,” I tell the cashier. “A single.”

Before opening my silver sedan, I untuck my shirt and roll up my sleeves. Long time ago, these little cigars were wrapped in clear plastic so the pink cellophane surprises me. I slide its brown skin under my nose while searching the sidewalk and the parking lot for Jen—as if she will materialize from our kitchen wagging her finger.

The lighter pops and I taste the sugary tip.

Inhale deep.

Noelani.

I met Noelani in my early twenties when we served tables across the bay from the Queen Mary. I was brewing decaf the morning she submitted her application. I remember the moment she walked in because Chauncey dropped a lemon from the slicer.

“James,” he whispered hard, “check this chick out!”

Around the corner toward the front desk stood this green eyed dime holding a resume. Her natural skin tone and jet black hair made the kitchen window popcorn with white hats. One busser did a double take so hard he could’ve filed workman’s comp.

Noelani sat across from the manager while I studied the plumeria print of her skirt, thick thighs forcing the flowers into bloom. Kind of thighs women fret about in the mirror but men love to squeeze beneath tabletops.

Chauncey said, “That’s a bad chick, *huh?*”

“Bad’ don’t cut it,” I said. “That girl’s the illest.”

“She Filipino or something?”

“Nope. Hawaiian.”

Noelani laughed with the manager and I spotted her canines, big as molars.

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

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

“I’m saying,” he said.

“You’re fired,” I said. “They’re not that bad.”

When the manager shook her hand, the chase was on for the new girl. Luckily, I was the

restaurant's lead trainer. They paid me time-and-a-half for my expertise.

On her first day, Noelani and I sat in the break room with the wooden high chairs and empty kegs.

Alone.

Before we opened the training manual, my heart sped from nerves and espresso. Tongue dry as a loofa, I knew my breath stank worse than my chitchat about slip-resistant shoes. Sitting close enough to touch Noelani, I could not maintain eye contact because each sea of grassy paint strokes would shore up yellow flecks of sunshine.

I taught her how to uncork a champagne bottle. Then we sampled the crab taquitos, the lobster stuffed salmon, the macadamia crusted mahi. Next for dessert was the crème brulee and I was completely caught off guard when the tip of the chocolate spoon slid past her lips. Head titled back, the thin muscles in her caramel neck swallowed the sweet custard.

“Good?” I said.

Between moans, she said, “This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted!”

Best. Thing. Tasted. We carried our dishes to the scullery. My black apron saved me from embarrassment.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I felt like I was the rookie because I forgot ingredients
...this is the illest chick I've ever met...lost my reading place...damn she's ill...dropped my pen...she's the illest ever invented!

Even the pimple on her earlobe looked precious.

That night, I microwaved dinosaur-shaped nuggets for Bryce. His tiny teeth bit the wings

off pterodactyls, their torsos dipped in ranch. He had recently outgrown the red booster seat I stole from work and the *Chef Boyardee* cans taped to the legs of his plastic chair saved him from tipping back again.

“Wha whrong, Daddy?”

“Tired.”

“Whan to whatch *Elmopawoohah*?”

“*Elmo-palooza.*”

Bryce stared.

“When mommee comin home?”

“Later.”

“Can I have i’creem?”

“Finish those raisins.”

“Dad-dy?”

“What?”

“Can I sleep on cowch witchu?”

His mom and I had divorced after our second anniversary yet neither of us had enough money to leave the apartment. Seemed like every time I’d almost get there, my car needed new break pads or a friend was getting married in Vegas. Bryce’s mom bartended at another restaurant so we’d trade off between shifts. But no matter who watched Bryce, he always watched *Elmopalooza*.

After he finished his dinner, he ate mint chip ice cream and watched it again. His tiny lips moved to his favorite song: “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.

Knowing I'd struck out with her the day before, I switched into automatic pilot, quizzing Noelani on table numbers and entrée pairings. During side conversations, I discovered she had played soccer in college until an awkward slide tackle destroyed her ACL—surgery, rehab, all that—yet in the meantime, her BA was almost done. She wanted to teach elementary school.

I told her I liked snowboarding and she said, “Mountains are my phobia. I hate them.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I breathe funny when I drive through them. If I see them in magazines, I whip the page.”

I thought about my own compulsion. For whatever reason, when Bryce was small, I could not carry him along the edge of a high surface for fear my arms would involuntarily throw him.

“That’s weird,” I told her.

“Did you see that movie about that airplane that crashed into a snowy mountain? The one where the survivors had to eat their dead?”

I nodded, even though my movie repertoire consisted of *Elmo’s World*, *Bedtime with Elmo*, *Elmo’s Potty Time*.

Noelani said, “My teammates freaked during that scene when the passengers cut frozen chunks from their dead friend’s ass. And the whole time, I was in the theater, covering my eyes, thinking, ‘Oh my God. Those mountains. They’re ginormous!’”

But the absolute kicker about Noelani was that she knew Hip Hop better than most guys.

She'd been to more live shows than I owned burned CDs. At that time in my life, to find a girl who liked Hip Hop was the equivalent of a woman finding a man who hates watching sports but *just loves* musicals. While growing up, Noelani had helped carry her brother's crates into house parties across the islands. He never spun for radio but instead cracked into the Vegas circuit, banking six figures a year without a high school diploma.

Inside her car, she passed along flyers for his upcoming shows. From her phone, I saw a picture of him holding a Corona in his backyard, her pinky pointing at everything he bartered from working private gigs—patio, fence, pool. But I kept staring at his face. He was paler than her.

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

“We're hapa haole.”

“Happy who?”

Noelani's incisors showed.

“Hapa haole. That means we're mixed. My mom's from the island but my dad's German. That's how I got these.” She batted her gems. “Oh, here it is, the mix I told you about.”

She slid a CD into the dash. As her brother scratched through the intro, my finger pads rubbed across the top of my knee. He had fast hands and was big into dancehall.

Noelani certified her training and we continued to hang out after shifts, mostly head nodding to breakbeats in her car. Sometimes we'd argue over what mattered most in lyrics—skill or emotion—but there was no denying the fact that my five-foot-four dream girl had revealed herself.

Looking back now, I should have mentioned my situation earlier. But at twenty-one, to admit you're a divorced parent, and still living with the kid's mom, borders on 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. I had made that mistake before and vowed never again

But one night in the empty parking lot, her windows turned foggy. I pulled my hand out from beneath her sweatshirt.

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

I was determined to tell Noelani about Bryce.

I said, “There’s something I want to tell you,” but I lost my nerve in the sheen of her hair. Black as a record. Like you could run your fingers through it to sample every track in her heart: the quiet slow jam, the up-tempo R&B cut, the underground classic.

I looked deep into her eyes and I said, “There’s a party Friday night. Wanna go?”

The summer solstice celebration doubled as a bon voyage for a restaurant host who had planned to hike the French hills with his girlfriend. Instead he later wound up with an Amsterdam prostitute who bunny eared his pockets.

When I opened the door for Noelani, the place was smokier than a barbeque pit. Nicotine clouds hovered beneath red light bulbs. The host wanted everyone to smoke so he could adapt to European clubs.

But first thing Noelani said: “Oh my God, I can’t be in here.”

“Too much smoke?”

She grabbed my arm, stared at the carpet.

“I hate cigarettes too,” I added. “It’s like inhaling cardboard.”

“Get me out.”

I scanned the room. The high schoolers near the bookcase coughed from their first cigarettes in life but the pros in the hallway sparked three at once. Then I saw it. Above the couch was a painting of Catalina.

“That’s an island, not a mountain,” I told Noelani. “Similar to Hawaii.”

She shut her eyes, clamped my forearm. I placed her hand inside mine and guided her to the balcony.

“Trouble in paradise?” Chauncey said as I slid the glass door.

The balcony was narrow: two lawn chairs, a string of white lights, a *Sublime* sticker slapped onto a cactus pot.

“Need a drink?” I said.

She cracked her knuckles.

“Hold tight,” I said, and coursed back through the party. The trapped smoke inside the apartment was chewy as the pot brownies someone made. In the kitchen, I poured two vodka-crans, stirred with my finger and wondered when to tell Noelani about Bryce. I poured more vodka and figured the night would tell me.

Outside, guys had Noelani surrounded like vultures but the mention of magic brownies cleared the balcony.

“Uhhh!” Noelani said, followed by a sip. “That guy who was sitting 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 a pack of strawberry Swishers from her purse and we traded drags on the girly smoke. I chuckled because I had never lit one before without first gutting the tobacco then relining the belly with chronic. But I’d given up on weed when Bryce was born; I needed money

in the worse way back then.

The sweet scent blended into the warm night. When the cigar was almost ashed, Noelani's chin dropped, her face neon green from a text. My buzz was settling in and I stared at her shoulders, shiny and brown, jutting out her black tank top like a bonus pair of small titties. She kicked her pink suede Pumas on the stucco banister, jean shorts dangling threads. The only thing to distract me from the tattoo on 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 fingers attacked the little letters on her phone. "You have to meet them!"

First the friends, then the family.

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

As I stood up, I touched her left shoulder.

At work, she and I would scribble rhymes to server pads trailed by *dot-dot-dot* for the other to complete. They were about anything, dumber the better. She started this one 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.

We rotated our lawn chairs toward each other, freestyling for the first time. Southern rap was the in-style so everything had to end with *'err*.

Noelani 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."

For my turn, Noelani caved her hands around her mouth to kick the cutest beatbox but

her bare thighs between my jeans tripped my tongue up.

Her fingers flicked across invisible wax. “That was wick-wick-*whack*,” she teased.

“Awick-awick-*whack*.”

She giggled then inhaled the Swisher, the skin on her clavicle sinking. The smoke drifted toward the pier where diehard fishermen huddled beneath lampposts. Behind us, the sliding glass door wiggled. Inside, clumps of people grooved with the bass line, the foggy red light giving 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 been in Manhattan because at that instant, I felt it was time to tell her.

“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, salty winds passed through palm trees to melt 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. Upon arrival, her friends—future bridesmaids—would bear witness to our interlaced fingers.

But up to that point, I envisioned Noelani holding more than just my hand. Her maiden name was something horrible to the ear: Hortchenberger or Hitlervragen. During the previous brunch shift, her face squinted with concentration as she landed Mimosas on her tray. Hurrying

to a large reservation, the ocean glistened around her form while she listed the cuts at the carving table. And the whole time I was standing behind a computer, imagining her as Bryce's kindergarten teacher, his small classmates greeting her in unison: "Hell-lo Miss-es Va-len-te!"

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

Noelani gave the most intent look as I explained the whole thing, my practiced words spilling out easily. But then, she let my hand go. Her drunken lisp vanished.

"You-are-a-committed-father," she said robotically as a telemarketer. "That-is-great-to-hear. Very-honorable-of-you."

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

She turned at the bar. "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. Plunging quarter after quarter into a Trivia machine I've never been good at.

Before last call, I saw Noelani in the mirror dancing with the soccer team's assistant coach. Wearing a zipped up Adidas sweatshirt, he was shorter than me in seventh grade yet square in the shoulders as a pool table. I couldn't see his face as he grinded her from behind. They were next to a Coors Light poster, Noelani oblivious to the Rocky Mountains stretched to the ceiling.

I got kicked out when the Long Island in my hand slipped and became a long puddle.

Chauncey agreed to pick my drunk-ass up since I promised to buy him a turkey sandwich at work. On the drive to his place, I shoved my head out the window 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!”

In the apartment, Chauncey guided me into his tiny bathroom to pee. I wobbled in the dark, splashing tile. When I plopped down on the soaked seat, I tried to focus, but my mind replayed the worst part of that night—the assistant kissing her. I teetered from the toilet and landed in the bathtub. Hot pee drenched my jeans. I shoved the shower curtain from my face and yelled, “Fuck Noelani! Snaggletooth bitch!”

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

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

From that experience, I learned it’s better just to be straight up so on my second date with Jen, I explained to her, “Okay, here’s my deal.”

She listened intently as Noelani had, even more so. Yet for a moment, I lost track of my thoughts as everything unfolded before my eyes: 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 braced for Jen’s rejection but instead she told me about her daughter who was close in age to Bryce. Years later we tied the knot and as time went by, friends dubbed us the downsized Brady Bunch.

Jen's on my caller ID now.

"Long day," I answer.

"I picked up a rotisserie chicken," she says.

"Alright."

"Want me to pack you a lunch for tomorrow?"

"Sure," I say at nearly a whisper.

"And I bought avocados. Made your favorite guacamole with Tapatio."

"Good."

"I know it's been a long week for you but Sunday will be fun."

"Sunday?"

"Father's Day. Hey, are you okay?"

The cigar heats my fingertips. "I hate traffic."

"Roll down your windows. When you get here, I'll open us some wine and light the massage candle."

"Sounds perfect, babe."

Jen hangs up and I roll the cigar between my fingers. I take a final puff then flip the nub onto the cement. While holding the smoke deep inside, my mind slips back to that balcony with Noelani...the drinks...the salty air. Although she's mute, her eyes burn into me like the smoke inside my chest. I thank her for my last Swisher and brush my lips across her forehead—she vanishes. At the same time, my lungs release a cloud over the dash.

I nod to myself and start the engine. I sip my coffee. I blend into traffic.