

Debtor

Jeni loved to swim out against the blue current of Kealekekua Bay and to crawl on the water's surface with the spinner dolphins. She would turn onto her back and float as they bobbed through the water just feet away from her. They would eventually jump out and spin until they splashed back down into the swells off the coast of the Big Island. She used to love to wave back toward the tiny dock where Jed helped tourists load their rented kayaks into the sea. She always caught his eye, and he would wave back, a wave that said we finally made it here, we finally moved to Hawaii, and I have given my wife what she had always wanted, the chance to be one with the ocean. She used to love to swim out to the spinner dolphins until Jed rolled the truck two years ago and took away both legs and part of her left arm. He drank too much at a Kona pub and floored his Jeep around the quick, short turns of the skinny road that led from Kona to their little village at the ocean's edge. He said he was fine. He said he could drive. But after the truck left the road and rolled the first time, Jeni stopped believing him. When she woke up trapped underneath the entire weight of the truck, she really stopped believing him. Now she spends her days hopped up on pain meds and dreaming about the dolphins in the bay, only steps from her back door.

Down at the dock, on a day like the rest since Jeni lost control of her limbs, Jed pulled a long, dual-person kayak from the water after helping two young, barely clad girls out of their sea-going vessel. They raved on and on about the spinner dolphins they had seen out in the middle of the bay, flailing their arms up into the air to illustrate the way the dolphins spun around their kayak. Jed just nodded and smiled and thought of his wife in bed. He thought of her every time someone came back from Captain Cook's

monument and talked about the dolphins. He wished everyday that the dolphins wouldn't be there and savored the days he didn't have to hear about them, even though he knew the dolphins kept his kayak and snorkel rental business afloat. He hated those fucking dolphins. He dreamt about taking a sniper rifle to the top of the cliffs that hung over the bay and shooting one everyday until he killed them all.

"You're welcome," he would say to every tourist that tipped extra because they got to see the spinners, and the tip would burn in his hand before he dropped it into his pocket and placed the paddles in the back of his truck. Jed dreamt of the day the dolphins would disappear and his business would dry up, and he could just drink himself to death and everyone would understand, with a dried up business, a horribly inflated Hawaiian mortgage, and a crippled wife. It would be obvious that the guilt in his stomach for crippling his wife had the mammoth-sized thirst that could not be quenched. But as long as the dolphins kept showing up, business would boom, and as long as business boomed, he owed it to his crippled wife to provide her food, medication, and assistance to the toilet three or four times a day. No one would understand if he started the heavy drinking while he still had to take care of Jeni. All Jed could do was say 'you're welcome' and pray for global warming to happen more quickly than projected, making the dolphins relocate to Alaska or some place like that.

Jed pulled the last remaining rentals out of the writhing blue ocean that lopped up against the ugly concrete dock. One by one he carried them to the trailer attached to his old blue and rusty brown pickup truck. Right before piling one on atop the other, Jed meticulously sprayed the ocean water off them, making sure the salt didn't eat at them overnight. He used to take even better care of the kayaks before the accident, but now he

does what he can to prolong going home to clean the house, make dinner, and scrub his wife down.

His mind jumped back to the her long muscular legs and arms diving straight into the water and leanly gliding through the pool, her torso twisting to create a tiny, beautiful wake. She always touched the wall before the other competitors and left only a speckle of water on the concrete edge when she humbly got out and congratulated everyone on their race before heading to him for a celebratory hug.

He stacked the last kayak up on the very top of the rest and centered it between the two stacks to keep the weight of the trailer balanced, and just as he began to tie the rope around them, he felt the earth shake beneath him, shake enough to bring the top kayak down toward his blond, curly hair. He put his arms up just in time to block the 200-pound falling piece of plastic, and it crashed onto his forearm and sent pain all the way through his body; he fell to the ground and bounced with the remaining jolts of an earthquake. The parts of the concrete slab used to bring in the kayakers fell into the ocean and were ushered out to sea by a massive disappearing tide.

Stupid tourists looked around at each other as if it was all part of the Hawaiian experience. They walked slowly to their cars to head to their fancy and luxurious hotels, slowly packing up their wet gear, leisurely sitting in their cars before starting their ignitions, and gingerly showing friends and family photos on their digital cameras as the sea departed so far out into the ocean that a tiny boat docked on a buoy half a mile out sat on the empty ocean floor.

“Get to high ground!” Jed’s sometimes friend and always business competitor, Kuuipu yelled at everyone in the lot. “Get to high ground everyone!” Kuuipu pointed

directly to the Tsunami Evacuation Route sign above his head. Tourists no longer shared photos in their cars, but started them up, peeled out backwards to the road, and got stuck in a bottleneck of traffic – a scared and reluctant woman sat in her car at the front of the line. Locals ran to the tourists' cars and without asking jumped in the back seats of the rented Jeeps and Corvettes and yelled at the tourists to get a fucking move on it.

Jed quickly unhooked the trailer from the ball, and with his one arm swung it as far as he could away from his truck, giving him enough room to pull backward and flip his truck around. He knew of a different road to get to Kona, the road he drove down the night he rolled his truck and crippled his wife. And then he thought of Jeni, lying in their bed in their tiny shack of a house. Within seconds, he flipped his truck around and began to climb over the barriers of the tiny parking lot toward his home. *I have to grab her from her bed, carry her to the truck, and strap her down for safety*, he thought to himself. He had to do all this before the plateau of ocean returned.

Just as he cleared the barriers and turned his wheel toward home, he heard screams from the other side of the giant concrete platform. The screams came howling out from where the waves crashed against the slab just moments before. There were no more waves, just an empty sea bed and two young girls hung up against the rocks that lined the concrete loading dock. Jed flipped his truck around and headed toward the screams and floored it to the edge. He looked down at the two young girls. When the earth started to shake and the tide receded, they had jumped off their sit-on-top kayaks toward the rocks beneath the concrete so they wouldn't be swept out with the tide into the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Jed grabbed a long paddle from the back of his truck and extended it down to the

bloodied girls on the rock. He kept his eyes on the horizon, knowing that soon enough, maybe exactly then, a wall of ocean water would come to eliminate the small coastal Hawaiian town that he and Jeni had made their home. As soon as each girl grabbed the paddle, he pulled them quickly up onto the concrete slab, carried them into the front seat of his truck, and wishfully assured them that he would get them out of the way of the impending tsunami. Kuuipu yelled at Jed again, telling him to get the fuck to higher ground. Kuuipu sped over a neighbor's yard and past the cluster fuck of tourists' cars waiting to get up the road to Kona.

Jeni lay waiting in her bed, awakened by the falling of paintings and vases, awakened by the shift of the ground. She called out for Jed. She prayed he had made it home from the dock, prayed that he had already walked through the door with his case of Longboard Ale, prayed he hadn't had more than two beers, and prayed that he sat on the lanai when the island rumbled from the shift of the ocean floor. She reached down with her one good arm and threw off the blankets, swung her lower body toward the side of the bed and sat up. She yelled for Jed again, but he did not answer. She yelled for him a third time and then wiped her sweating face with the corner of the sheet. She did not cry.

With the two tourist girls in the front seat of Jed's truck, he drove over the barriers of the tiny parking lot. By then the line of tourists had moved up the road, emptying out the bottleneck of cars. All Jed could do then was pray that he had enough time to get Jeni and get to high ground. He again floored his half rusted, half blue truck on a road parallel to the ocean shoreline. The two girls sat next to him bloodied and crying, telling him he had to hurry and that they'd seen the Sri Lanka shit, and it scared the shit out of them.

“I can’t leave my wife,” he told them. He had hurt her enough.

He sped along the road that had now become dirt and bounced over the bumps in the unpaved road that made the girls shriek. As he drove, he glanced continuously at the shore on the right hand side of the truck. The sea shore grew larger and larger by the second but at least the tide hadn’t returned. He drove past the tsunami evacuation sign, heading in the opposite direction. The girls screamed that they were going the wrong way. But he could not leave his wife.

Since the accident, time had been split up into two basic periods: pre-forgiveness and post-forgiveness. Jed preferred pre-forgiveness. During the pre-forgiveness time period, Jeni yelled at him, cried to him, and hated him. He knew exactly how she felt, and everyday he knew at one point he just had to take the yelling, to hold her when she cried, and accept that she hated him for what he did – he really only experienced one emotion, and that was guilt. He knew what guilt was, and he knew how to be guilty. He writhed in self hatred and this helped him carry her everyday, sleep on the hospital floor, endure the yelling, and accept the hatred. He could handle the guilt because he deserved it. During the pre-forgiveness time period he still loved his wife.

Jed turned the corner into his driveway, kicking up dirt, starting to believe they would not make it to high ground in time. It had been too long since the earthquake. The sea would return any minute to pummel everything along the coastline and kill anyone that sat, lay, stood, drove, or screamed beneath a gigantic wave of unstoppable ocean. He pulled as close to his house as he could, jumped out of his car, and ran toward the front door. The young girls yelled from the car for him to hurry or they would take the truck and leave him and his disabled fucking wife there.

Jeni had managed to pull herself up into her newly acquired prosthetic legs and sit on the bed, and she buckled the straps needed to keep the mid-grade, insurance bought plastic joints on the end of her stubs that started mid-thigh. She stood and walked to the lanai that extended out of their tiny bedroom out toward the coast. Looking out across the ocean shore, she saw the rich volcanic soil of shallow ocean floor for more than a mile out into the sea. Her eyes widened as quickly as the sea receded, and she yelled Jed's name again.

Jed heard the sound of Jeni's voice call from the house and the late tsunami siren. They both tore through his ears, both signaling his life to be almost over. It was rare that officials had enough time to even sound the tsunami warning horns, so he knew the returning ocean may hit him before he could get Jeni out of the house. The warning horn created shrieks in the cab of his truck as the blaring sirens made death more realistic to the two girls Jed had rescued just minutes earlier. He placed his hand on the door handle and he heard Jeni scream again, but this time he heard her post-forgiveness screams in his head – *I forgave you for crippling me you son of a bitch, and you can't even get me goddamn cup of coffee in the morning – I forgave you for trying to kill me and giving me no real reason to live, but I can't forgive you for passing out on the couch drunk when you know I need help to take a piss in the middle of the night – I forgave you for cutting off my legs and taking my one love in live, now stop moping around the house and acting like you're the victim!*

He heard Jeni scream again from the bedroom lanai. He released the door handle, turned and ran back to his truck. The young girls hugged him as he swung the truck around and headed up the tsunami evacuation road. He sped around every tiny corner,

weaved up the mile-long road toward high ground, and drove as fast as he could without tipping and rolling the truck off the road and down the side of the cliffs. They would not suffer the same fate as Jeni did two years ago. He was sober.

At the top of the cliffs, Jed pulled his truck into one of the roadside observation pullouts. He jumped out of the cab to watch the massive wall of water rush toward the island as if the infamous cliffs of Dover had turned to sea and now glided toward the Big Island. He looked down and spotted his tiny shack of a house at the edge of the coast. He waved goodbye to his house, his business, and his crippled wife, and as he lowered his resounded hand back down his side, he saw a small figure exit the home. Jeni had made it out of the house and pulled herself toward the road. The giant wave swallowed her and she became one with the ocean.