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Spirited Away

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Spirited Away

A senior thesis submitted to
The Department of Humanities
College of Theology, Arts, & Sciences

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for a Bachelor of Arts degree in English

by

Ashley Aczon

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“Have endless patterns and repetitions accompanying your thoughtlessness, as if to say let
go of that other more linear story, with its beginning, middle, and end, with its
transcendent end, let go, we are the poem, we have come miles of life, we have survived
this far to tell you, go on, go on.”

– Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water*

This is dedicated to all of my family, friends and loved ones who believed in me when I
needed it the most. Thank you for giving me the courage to forgive others and above all, the
courage to forgive myself.

Introduction

Ask anyone from Hawaii if they believe in ghosts and spirits and they will be able to tell you the hundreds of tales we learned as children. When my friends and I were old enough to explore the island without adult supervision, we would find our thrills in ghost hunting. We would try to follow the path of the Night Marchers who were the restless spirits of deceased ancient Hawaiian warriors. Or we would head to the Nu'uaniu Pali, in the hopes for a brief encounter with the Hawaiian goddess of Fire and mother of the Hawaiian Islands, Pele. The supernatural was something that I was surrounded by since birth, and has surrounded my family even back in the lands of Okinawa and the Philippines.

Eventually the idea of ghosts was no longer enough to fulfill our young, thrill-seeking hearts. We chased spirits alright, but not those of the dead. We mixed liquor with our ideas of love and learned too late the consequences of that toxic cocktail. Our childhood innocence turned into teenage invincibility. We were untouchable.

The following chapters are little snippets into my life from the age of five, spanning all the way to the present. At a young age, violence and death were very much a part of my life and would be the basis for the way I perceived the world around me. While there are only a few short stories from my early childhood, including the anger and violence in a traditionally patriarchal family, and the death of my Grandmother, those memories are what led to my reactions and perceptions of events that would unfold in my adolescent and teenage years.

There were a few specific authors who greatly influenced me in the style of my writing as well as those who gave me the courage to tell my story. In regards to style, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* was where I found my inspiration to write

short stories that captured little snippets of my life. At first, I was intimidated with the idea of creating such a large piece of work, but by taking small steps it was a lot more manageable. In the end, the final draft of my thesis came together very organically. I wrote what my heart desired and let my mind tell the story it wanted to by tapping in to my subconscious.

Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* as well as Haruki Murakami's *Underground*, made me understand the importance of storytelling and culture. There were so many stories buried throughout the different generations in my family and I was astonished of what I could learn about my own culture and family by simply listening.

Authors such as Sylvia Plath, Marya Hornbacher and Lidia Yuknavitch are the women who gave me the courage to write. Nitpicking at every aspect of your life to understand where you lost yourself is a daunting task. At first, I questioned if I had the guts to do it and after reading the autobiographical works of the three aforementioned women, I felt much more confident in myself and I did not feel alone anymore. Through their work and through other people's stories of hardships, I realized that everyone has a story to tell and it is almost never pretty. I learned to not be ashamed of what I have been through and in the end to be proud of the strength I have used to get me this far. We all have our own ghosts from our past and the stories that surround them. I've listened to my parents' tales of their own hauntings and those of our ancestors. I've listened to the legends of the land that I was born and raised on. This is my ghost story.

In the newly constructed homes, at the top of the hill in Mililani, a young boy kept seeing a little man-boy in his room. His father was blind, but could feel a presence in the room every night at two am. Concerned, the father asked neighbors who all reported similar incidents with their children. When asked what the man-boy wanted, the children would reply that he would put his finger to his lips and mouth, "shhh."

Chapter 1:

Monkey Bars

I guess it was a little more common when I was a little girl for parents to physically punish their children. Mine would always threaten me, but would never actually be able to do it. My uncle on the other hand, believed it was a necessary part of raising a child. "You need to show her who's boss," he would tell my mom whenever I would act up.

When I was about seven years old, my uncle and a cousin of mine who is three years younger than me, came over for lunch. My cousin and I were like sisters and spent nearly every weekend together playing outside and living up our childhood years. While she was at my house, we decided it would be fun to sneak away to the park a few blocks down the road. "Don't go past the stop sign!" My mom yelled as we walked out the door. We crept closer and closer to the stop sign, both of us a little hesitant at first, but lured by the idea of the glorious monkey bars and swirly slides.

We set one foot past the stop sign and took off running down the road. We were winded by the time we reached the park, but the adrenaline of disobeying our parents was enough to keep us going. We were little hamsters running around, up and down the metal contraption built for pure fun. After a few minutes of extreme jungle-gyming, we decided we should head back home before our parents noticed we were gone.

Unfortunately, we were a little too late. As soon as we turned the corner to my street, we could see our parents waiting at the end of the cul-de-sac. We were definitely in no hurry anymore to reach my house, so with our heads hanging, we took our time; each stride felt heavier and heavier as we trudged the last few feet to our fuming parents.

“WHAT DID I SAY MITSUE?!” my mom screamed in my face. I didn’t dare say a word. She stood in front of me with her arms crossed and even though I could not see her face, I could feel her eyes piercing straight through my skull. I peeked over and saw my uncle grab my cousin by her arm and drag her towards the front door of my house. She was pulling against his grip with all her might and screaming as if she were being kidnapped. Her cries were ringing in my ears and were so startling that I looked at my mom out of fear, not for myself but for my cousin. Her face was a mixture of fear and concern. In a split second, she had forgotten about her anger towards me and followed my uncle and cousin into the house.

My uncle was screaming at my cousin at the top of his lungs as I walked in the door. My mom was standing next to my uncle, urging him to calm down. His hand was still wrapped around my cousin’s arm and I thought that at any moment, he would snap it straight off.

My cousin and I were very small growing up. Both of us were always the smallest in our class and were never able to put on much mass over the years. The rest of our family is pretty stocky to say the least, so we would always get made fun of and my cousin would get the brunt of it. At least I had been playing sports and was starting to put on a little more weight by this time. My cousin, on the other hand, was still too young and fragile. Her black hair against her porcelain skin would always prompt people to compare her to a china doll.

“Dale, stop. Let me handle this.” My mom said calmly to my uncle.

“You’re too easy on them!” he said as he threw my cousin to the ground.

“DALE!”

With a loud smack, he hit my cousin on the exposed part of her leg, right above the knee with his open palm. She screamed in pain and I could already see the red welts forming that would eventually leave a bruise.

Before he could hit her again, my mom grabbed his arm.

“You are not going to do that here. And Ashley, go to your room right now.”

I was too stunned to move. I stared up at the two of them in fear that my uncle would hurt my cousin even more if I were not there.

“You’re always so easy on her! You never hit her, that’s why she’s so weak!” My uncle then turned to me and pointed his finger in my face. Through clenched teeth he said, “You’re lucky. Keep it up and maybe your mom will let me deal with you. How would you like that huh?”

“Ashley, go to your room NOW!”

I obeyed this time- afraid that if I didn’t, I’d have to go home with my uncle. My cousin was wailing on the ground as I ran around her to my room and shut the door behind me. I ran over to window where I knew I’d be able to eavesdrop on the adults’ conversation.

“Don’t you dare try to discipline my daughter and don’t ever threaten her ever again,” I heard my mom say to my uncle.

“You don’t know what you’re doing! You and Joey are too easy on her! You guys are gonna regret it when she gets older.”

My mom did not say anything to him. It was silent for a while then I heard my cousin and uncle making their way out of the house and my mom's footsteps heading towards my room. She opened the door slowly, no longer angry, but almost sad.

"You know you weren't supposed to go to the park."

"I'm sorry..." I said as tears started filling my eyes.

"Are you going to hit me?"

I was taken aback when, instead of being angry with me, she knelt down and hugged me. I could hear her attempts at muffling her crying, but I already knew. I pulled away and saw the tears coming down her eyes. Confused, I asked her what was wrong. Why was my mom crying when I was the bad one? She didn't do anything wrong; I was the one who went to the park. She was just furious with me only a few minutes ago, what happened?

"I will never hit you. I promise."

She held me again and kissed the top of my head.

"The thought crossed my mind before, but just having you watch your uncle do that made me sick to my stomach. I will never put you through that again."

No one knows why, but there is a legend that if you go to the Mililani Cemetery at night and drive around the statue of the Virgin Mary, she will move. You have to circle around the statue three times in your car then shine your headlights directly at the statue and wait after the third time around. If you're lucky, her hand will motion for you to go closer.

Chapter 2:

Cookie Crumbs

I was definitely proud of myself for getting involved and working hard to be elected as an officer for student government. I was finally going to be in the fifth grade, one of the big kids on campus. My first duty as Secretary was to go through an intense all-day training at Ms. Tansey's house. There were five of us who were dropped off by our parents and, of course, since my mom was always running late, I was running late too. I always got so anxious when I wasn't right on time or a few minutes early. I liked to mentally prepare myself for social situations before I was thrown headfirst into the deep end.

I had baked tollhouse sugar cookies so we had something to munch on while we were working. I meticulously placed the cookies on a square, blue ceramic plate. My mom and I walked up the steps in the garden towards the enormous dark wood house. At first sight, it looked like an oversized haunted tree house. I was a little intimidated by the size of the house and that just added to my fear for the cookies. I had not yet tried them and was worried that I may have undercooked them. They still had that milky-white color on the tops of them instead of the golden brown that the directions said they would be. I was worried I would burn them so I took them out of the oven, but at closer inspection, I began to doubt my cookie-making abilities. I mean, the bottoms were only slightly tinted beige!

What would the others think? How is she going to be a student council officer when she can't even bake cookies thoroughly?

My nerves were getting hard to contain.

"Mom. Try one. Pleaaaaaase."

She told me she wasn't hungry and that she was sure they tasted fine. I could eat one, but it would be pretty embarrassing if someone came to the door and saw me munching on the cookies I had made before offering some to anyone else. I didn't want them to think I was that gluttonous.

We finally reached the front door after meandering through the long walkway. My mom rang the doorbell and Ms. Tansey promptly answered the door as if she was watching us make our way there the whole time. My mom and Ms. Tansey were friends since they had seen each other at parent meetings and other school events that parents and teachers mingle at. They hugged and chatted a bit while I stared at the plate of cookies in my hands.

"Hey Norma, I'm going to have to pick up Ashley a bit earlier than expected today."

"That's fine, is everything okay?"

"Her Grandma just passed away this morning and we need to go to the hospital to say goodbye and be with everyone."

"What?!" I usually never spoke up in front of adults, but I was so confused. This information was completely new to me. My mom ignored me.

No, there was no way my parents had completely forgotten to tell me that my Nanay had died. Telling their only daughter that her Nanay was dead *before* leaving the house was not something that is just forgotten.

"This is the first I'm hearing this." I mumbled.

Ms. Tansey stared at my mom and me awkwardly, unsure of what to say.

“Well, I’ll pick you up in about two hours.”

My mom hugged me and kissed the top of my head while I stood outside the door of Ms. Tansey’s, still gripping the plate of sugar cookies. She ushered me inside the house and helped me navigate my way through the maze of rooms to the kitchen dining room, where the others were waiting.

“Ooooh cookies!” they all exclaimed as I set the plate down in the middle of the table. Ms. Tansey pulled me over to the side.

“Are you okay Ashley? You just found out you lost your grandma.”

“Oh yeah I’m fine! I think she might have gotten it wrong though. She was just really sick and in a coma, I don’t think she’s dead yet.”

“Oh okay... well your mom is picking you up soon so we better get started!”

The next two hours went by as a blur. I did not retain one hint of information that day, but apparently my cookies were to die for. The plate was entirely cleaned off by the time it was time for me to leave. My mom had called Ms. Tansey to have me come outside when her and my dad arrived. My dad got in the back seat and let me take the front, as was habit now because of my motion sickness. Usually my dad is the one driving, but I figured it was because my mom knew where the house was so she decided to drive.

“So how are you feeling?” my mom asked when I shut the door behind me.

“Um, fine I think. So... why did you tell Ms. Tansey that Nanay died?”

“She passed away this morning, your dad and I were talking about it and I could have sworn we told you.”

So she did pass away this morning and my parents really did FORGET to tell me. I was ten years old and a clusterfuck of emotions. Was I angry that they forgot to tell me? Was I thankful, so I didn't have the stress during training? I was definitely in shock though. I had just been at the hospital the night before. She was in a coma, but she had woken up before. She would slip in and out of consciousness for months anyways, so I wasn't too worried when we left the hospital.

After a few minutes of processing the day's events in my head, it just slipped out of my mouth like the bile that wanted to come up after I finally realized what was happening:

"YOU GUYS DIDN'T TELL ME!"

"I DID TELL YOU!" my mom and I have a habit of arguing for arguing's sake, and there was no way in hell that either of us would admit that we were wrong. To this day, we don't know why I was so confused at Ms. Tansey's. Well... I know, but my mom is still confused about it.

I could hear my dad chuckling in the back seat. The first noise he managed to make since I got in the car. He was sitting in the back with his arms folded over his chest, head down and his eyes closed. When I heard him I looked in the rearview mirror. He was silently laughing at the two of us and shaking his head. I looked at my mom and smiled. I'm not sure why, I just couldn't help it. We stopped yelling at each other and gave my dad some peace and quiet for the remainder of the ride.

When we arrived at the hospital we were greeted by a million somber hugs and kisses. This was all new to me and I wasn't too sure how I was supposed to act, so I remained quiet and did what I was told. My parents told me to wait in the lobby area until they came out and got me. I assumed they were going to Nanay's room, and was a little

relieved that I didn't have to go in there. I had never been around a dead body before and wasn't sure that I wanted to see one even though it was my Nanay. I played with my cousins in the courtyard until my mom came out and called me over to her.

"It's time to say goodbye to Nanay."

I did not want to go in there. I was afraid. I unconsciously started shaking my head no, and my Aunties saw. They came over and told me that I didn't have to be scared, it was only Nanay and I needed to pay my respects. I was being pushed towards the room and I could feel my legs getting heavier as the doorway grew closer. As I rounded the corner and the doorway stood right in front of me, I could see my dad and his brothers sitting around the bed. My uncle had his hand on my dad's back as he shielded his face from me. He had his face covered like he usually does when he gets headaches and the chaotic world is too much for him to handle.

"Come and say bye." One of my uncles motioned me over to his side, right by my Nanay. Then I saw her lying on the bed. She just looked like she was sleeping. I had seen her like this every day for the past few months, why was I so scared? My uncle's hands grabbed mine and placed my hand on Nanay's. I'm sure I tried to resist him, but it was no use. My hand was on her skin. Her death suddenly became real. The cold veiny hand beneath mine sent shivers up my spine. It was just there. Unresponsive. I was afraid that out of nowhere the dead hand was just going to reach up and grab me. I couldn't think of it belonging to my Nanay. My Nanay was warm and loving. This hand was not human.

I stood like that, staring at my Nanay's body. I was there when they covered her face with the sheet too. We were all packed into the room and I left just as confused as when I got there. I was not prepared for that day in the slightest.

My dad is a construction worker. Once, he was lucky enough to work the graveyard shift renovating a hospital morgue. He was nailing rope in the ground along the wall when nails that he had already nailed down kept disappearing. As he was searching around the area to see where they had vanished to, he realized his drill was missing from where he placed it. "Leave me alone! I'm trying to work!" he yelled down the hall. He proceeded to replace the missing nails. When he was done, he saw his drill right where it went missing.

Chapter 3:

Crimson Formaldehyde

"Did you remember the salt?" my mom asked as we walked out the door, all clad in black. She was one of those people who were always big on superstition and since we were going to a funeral, we had to remember to bring a little bag of salt to throw over our shoulders before we walked back into the house at the end of the day. My dad shook the few tablespoons of salt that he put in the Ziploc bag in front of my mom's face.

"Let's go. We're gonna be late!" my mom, as usual, was making us run late as she kept scurrying her little legs around the house making sure she didn't forget anything. For a little lady who is only 4'9, she zipped around the house like a roadrunner. Despite how fast she moved, her forgetfulness always made us late. Finally, the three of us hopped in the car, my dad in the driver's seat, me in the passenger and my mom in the backseat fussing on her phone, calling all the relatives to make sure they didn't forget that today was the funeral.

I'm not sure why they would forget about the funeral. She was calling my dad's brothers and sisters. I don't know how they could possibly forget their own mother's funeral. It did feel surreal to my ten-year-old self at the time. It seemed that hours and hours of preparation had gone into this event. Practicing songs and hymns, preparing food,

crafting collages of Nanay's life all brought the family together. I was a little exhausted of my family by now, but today was the day that all our hard work would finally pay off. We would be able to pay our respects, see family friends and go our separate ways until the next big event in our family would bring us all back together.

The drive to the chapel was fairly relaxed. My dad and I made small talk as he asked if I was ready to sing in front of the family. My cousins and I all prepared a song for my Nanay since she always asked us to sing for her. Our aunties and uncles had told us that back when she was younger, Nanay used to have the voice of an angel and that trait was passed down to our generation. We always thought that they were jealous because it seemed that my dad's generation wasn't so lucky and that trait skipped them.

As we pulled into the driveway of the chapel, I began to feel a little nervous. I knew we had a big family, but I was not ready for the amount of people that were here. It looked like a swarm of black ants at the top of the hill, congregating around the driveway entrance to the chapel. I was nervous to sing, but at least I'd have my cousins right there with me. I was more nervous about greeting people at the casket. I was to stand at the front by Nanay's body while people came to pay their respects. My cousins and I would all take turns with our parents so that each family could make their rounds and socialize with the attendees. When my parents and I made it inside, I knew it was time to say goodbye to Nanay. I was nervous and scared, but I did not know why. How could I be afraid of my own Nanay?

I made my way through the sea of crawling ants, trying not to bump into anyone and trying not to get stepped on. I pulled my sweater tighter around me, as if it were giving me

a hug and making me smaller and insignificant so I could go unnoticed. As I finally reached the front of the chapel, my stomach began to turn.

I could barely see the top of her face when mine began to go white. It looked as if they took her body and sucked it dry. Her skin was stretched much too thin over her bones, the wrinkles that had been there for years, now barely visible. It was like they gave my Nanay's dead body very bad Botox then proceeded to cover up their mishap with piles of makeup and crimson lipstick. Why would someone put crimson red lipstick on a decaying body is beyond me. It seems a bit morbid to put the brightest color on the color wheel on a face completely devoid of color except for the blue de-oxygenated veins running along the sides of her neck. The smell was another story. I'm not sure what it was exactly, but the chemicals they used, along with the scent of her decaying corpse, hit me right in the gut. The smell alone made me want to hurl all over the overly extravagant flower arrangements that were placed around the casket. It smelled old; an abandoned stale room, with a hint of sour. I guess that's what her body was now. Her soul had abandoned this vessel that we were supposed to dispose of today. I knew that this was once my Nanay, but I could not make that connection. Sick to my stomach, I turned away from the casket while my dad placed his hand on my back for comfort. With no tears in my eyes unlike everyone else, I looked down and attempted to hide on my dad's side so no one thought I was an insensitive little brat.

The rest of the funeral went smoothly. We sang, we mourned, we ate. At the end of the funeral, we all gathered in the cafeteria to chat and relax before the actual burial. I got up to use the restroom and realized that my dad was nowhere to be found. I had to walk over to the chapel to use the restroom and I was sure he would probably be outside to walk

me over there. Through the open doors, I saw the back of his head on the front pew, right in front of the casket. He was alone and I was sure he was saying his goodbyes in private. I should have left him alone, but I was afraid of being by myself. I walked in through the doors and quietly made my way over to him. Thankfully, the casket was now closed. He put his arm around me and said I had sang very well and that Nanay would be proud.

“Sit here and say your goodbyes.” He said as I sat next to him and buried my face in his jacket.

“I told your aunties not to make you see Nanay like this. I don’t want you to remember her like this. Just picture the good times and say your goodbyes.”

So he knew I was afraid. How embarrassing to be afraid of your own Grandma. I was ashamed but at the same time, I was thankful that my dad understood how I felt. He explained to me that this was all just for show and that I did not have to feel comfortable or overwhelming sadness at her funeral. This was a place for everyone else to pay their respects and say goodbye. My Nanay would always be here with me and I could say goodbye when I felt I was ready.

“The makeup artists did a bad job huh?”

I laughed a little while the tears that had been absent all day began to well up in my eyes.

A young couple was driving late down old Pali road. They decided to stop and have a little “fun” uninterrupted in the car. After they were done, their car would not start. The boy left to get help. After a while, the girl fell asleep to the sound of leaves scratching the roof of the car. She was awoken by bright police lights and escorted out of the car. The officer told her to exit the vehicle and do not look back. She didn’t listen. She turned and saw her boyfriend’s dead body hanging by his foot, his fingertips scraping the roof of the car.

Chapter 4:

Young Gods

The truck was a rusty red-orange color. It wasn’t originally made that way. Years of wear and tear and the Hawaii humidity took its toll on the once cherry colored Toyota two-door. The truck bed, where I always claimed a seat, was covered by one of those camper shell-things so we could pack our entire gang of up-to-no-good kids into it. The truck bed was always filled with blankets, pillows and sweatshirts. All were musty smelling from sitting in the back unattended for days at a time, but once the weekend rolled around, they found their purpose again in aiding our midnight to early morning adventures by keeping us warm and cozy. We had all of our supplies for the night: forties, cigarettes and a bottle of SoCo.

It was the tail end of summer and I would be beginning my freshman year of high school in just a few weeks. I was excited to finally be going to school with all of these people that I called my friends. The weekend gang consisted of my best friends Jackie and Crystal and Jackie’s older brother, Will’s, friends. Will’s friends all were much older than us three girls and had been up to no good for years before we even knew what beer tasted like. When my girls and I were younger, we would watch Will and his friends depart for the

night and watch in awe as we waited for the day that they'd finally invite us out with them. Now that we were going to be starting high school and attending the same school as some of them, they finally let us tag along to "show us the ropes."

Although it was a late summer night, the island breeze left a small chill in the air. We were sitting outside smoking a cigarette waiting for Jackie's parents to be sound asleep before we all started up the truck and drove off into the night. Her parents let us all hang out, but made it clear that the three of us young girls were not to leave with Will and his friends when they went out. Luckily for us, Jackie's parents were very sound sleepers and we were all able to sneak off together right around midnight. It became routine that summer. While waiting for their parents to fall asleep, we decided that we would be going to the beach to drink since it was such a clear night. We all packed into the truck. Jackie always somehow managed to snag the passenger seat by flirting with the driver while Crystal liked to ride up in the front cab of the truck, away from all the smokers. As for me, I loved riding in the truck bed with everyone else. There would be anywhere from five to ten of us in that truck on any given night. The truck bed was definitely where all the fun was. We would bring speakers and blast music while smoking cigarettes out the little hole of a window in the camper all while taking shots of SoCo and washing it down with forties full of Mickey's.

Needless to say, those of us in the back were feeling pretty good by the time we got to the beach that we drank at regularly. We all rolled out of the truck bed and ran through the parking lot to the hole in the fence. I'm not too sure who had been the first of our friends to discover this beach, but it was pretty amazing that they did considering how hidden the beach entrance was. It was all the way at the end of the parking lot that looked

more like a half empty junkyard. Old boats and boating supplies seemed to just be strewn haphazardly in this wide-open lot illuminated by a flickering street lamp that cast red shadows on the black asphalt. At the end of the lot was a long barbed wire fence that went on for a mile. The fence separated the industrial areas and junkyards from the open ocean. Somehow, a genius discovered the secret passage that allowed us to cross over into the sand and saltwater that lay beyond the fence. The hole was about three feet wide and five feet tall. It was hidden behind one of the old boats that we would play on when we were drunk and exploring.

Once we were through the hole and onto the beach, it was like we were leaving the world behind. The red cast of the street lamps did not reach the sand since they were facing the opposite direction, so the only light we had was from the moon and the flashing red light in the water, miles off shore. If you looked all the way to the East, you could see the faint glow of downtown Honolulu across the bay area. Just a bunch of tiny little yellow dots twinkling like the stars above our heads. We had ditched the speakers and left our electronics in the truck so we wouldn't lose them and traded them for the blankets and pillows we had collected in the truck bed. After we had laid a few blankets down, all of us found our spots and laid around just talking, sipping, smoking, and listening to the waves crash a few feet away from us.

Hours and hours passed. None of us kept track of time; we kind of just knew when it was time to pack up and head home. That time would come right when the last sip of alcohol was slurped up and gone. Finding slippers, shoes and keys in the sand always was a struggle. "I found them!" someone would always yell when the truck keys were finally dug up. We'd all cheer and make our way back through the hole in the fence to the truck. The

ride back was much less fun. Most of the gang would fall asleep, shoulder-to-shoulder, sleeping on laps or if you were really drunk, laying in the middle over everyone, not giving a shit where you slept. Crystal and I would usually stay at Jackie's because that's where our parents believed we were sleeping, but tonight, I wanted to go home. Matt and I were fighting and I did not want to have to sleep in the same house as him. Matt was one of Will's best friends and although he was a bit older than me, he was a senior, we began a little relationship after summer started. We saw each other nearly every day and it was nice to have someone you could relax and cuddle with at the end of the night. Although we fought all the time and he was constantly drunk or high, I was infatuated with the idea of dating an older boy. Usually we would go back to Jackie and Will's and pass out on the floor along with everyone else. But tonight, we were arguing again and I could not handle being around him in my drunken stupor. I somehow convinced myself that going home and sleeping in my own bed was the best idea.

"Are you sure?" Will asked when I asked them to take me to my house.

"Your parents will kill you."

I knew my parents would kill me. They did not know what I did when I "slept over" at Jackie's house. For all they knew, we were painting each other's nails and were in bed by ten. Despite this fact, I would not go anywhere besides home.

We pulled into my street and I told them to stop a few houses away so that the roar of the truck's engine and slamming of the truck bed wouldn't wake my parents. I walked a few yards to my house and walked quietly, or so I thought, to the front door. Fumbling around for my keys, dropping everything, I was startled when the porch light turned on.

Shit. My mom groggily peeled open the front door, squinting at me in confusion.

“What are you doing home?!” she asked in an angry whisper.

“I just didn’t want to stay, I had Will take me home.”

She stepped a little to the side to let me walk through the door, but I became worried. There was only a few inches between me and her and I was sure I smelled like my nights activities.

“Why do you smell like cigarettes?!”

“They smoke, I was around them.”

It hit me then, how drunk I really was. I could barely keep my balance while taking off my shoes and was causing a mess, just trying to make it through the entryway of my house.

“HAVE YOU BEEN DRINKING?!”

“No....”

“Get over here! Let me smell you!”

“NO!” not thinking, I ran around the house like a maniac screaming, waking up my dad. I guess I thought my mom and I were now playing tag, and she was it. I began laughing uncontrollably as my mom made her best attempts to catch me.

“Ashley! You reek of alcohol!”

“Uhhhhh... they were drinking and the smell got on me!” Now I know how ridiculous this must have sounded and can understand why my dad burst out laughing from the bedroom.

“You’re so grounded!!!!” my mom yelled. “Go to bed! We’ll deal with this in the morning! JOEY STOP LAUGHING!”

I was grounded indefinitely. For three months to be exact. That never stopped me, and my mom and I still laugh about the first time I came home drunk.

Chapter 5:

Cherry Cola

The hot, sticky summer air was unbearable for the girls as they rode in the back of the old Chevy pickup, hot air breezing past them like a dragon breathing down their exposed skin. All of them were eager to get out of the miserable heat and into the air-conditioned house at the top of the hill. The house was tucked into the corner of an undisturbed suburban street. No crime and certainly no violence were ever witnessed there.

When they pulled up, the girls jumped out the back, ran to the house and swung the door wide open as if they owned the place. "Hope you poured me a shot!" Kiana announced as she walked in the house; always the first one in the door. The night would consist of their usual routine of drinking a ludicrous amount of alcohol while feeding their bodies illegal substances mixed with their collection of prescription strength pills. The perfect cocktails for young girls who had not yet experienced the many things life had to offer.

The night went on and everyone began to slip into a haze. One by one they all began to fall asleep, collecting anything they could use as makeshift bedding. Hoodies, sweaters, t-shirts from the guys who thought they were too macho to wear them. Everyone began to fall quietly asleep as was normal in their nightly routine.

Of course, Kiana was outside of the house with her boyfriend, always the last ones to go to bed due to their constant arguing. They had their arguments, but they always seemed

to make up in the morning and acted as if nothing happened. No one thought twice about going outside and stopping Kiana from walking home.

The next morning the doorbell rang. Once, twice, three times and then a long continuous annoying tone that finally woke everyone up. The aggressive pounding on the door also jerked everyone out of their makeshift beds. Matt, the owner of the house, ran downstairs and made it around the just-awoken bodies sprawled out on the floor. No one in the house that morning expected what was beyond that door.

A man, who looked like he was old enough to be a dad stood at the door cursing at the top of his lungs. His words were too flooded with anger and pain to make any sense. Another person was there behind him, holding him back. It was his wife, who was sobbing uncontrollably while grabbing his arm that was raised to give Matt a blow that would surely knock him out. "She's dead! What the f-- did you do to my daughter?!" He screamed and no one said a word.

Kiana's boyfriend stood at the foot of the stairs and immediately dropped to his knees. "I didn't think she was serious..." He was still on the floor, too shocked to even cry. "She told me she took too much Xanax but..." his voice trailed into the silence. No one looked up, no one wanted to believe it.

Chapter 6:

Southern Hospitality

Cold. The cold of the hard white acrylic bathtub wracked my whole body as my naked skin met its bottom. The lights were so bright I couldn't stand to open my eyes, but I could hear someone in there with me. I wanted to say I was cold; to please put my clothes

back on, I'm freezing. But every time I opened my mouth to cry for help, the only thing that came out was vomit.

Blood. I felt the warmth cascading down my neck from my ear. My eyes could not open to see what I had done, but I could feel the hot and sticky fluid being smeared on my right cheek. I thrashed too hard and hit my head on the side of something hard.

"Shit. She's bleeding," I heard him say. Then came the water.

It felt nice at first- the heat of the water enveloping my limp body as I lay on the bottom of the bathtub in fetal position. Then the shower came on. The millions of drops of water were smacking the surface of the tub all around me. I couldn't hear anything else except for the exploding water droplets, but they sounded like millions of glass marbles being poured out everywhere. The never-ending cascade of noise echoed in my ears and became unbearable. I thought my heart would stop.

Heavy. That's how my body felt when he carried me into the room. I could picture my arms and legs dangling like a corpse as he transferred me from the bathroom to his bedroom. It was dark, I'm sure. Or maybe my face was in the pillow. I can't be certain. But there was no light whatsoever. The door closed. Footsteps made their way towards the bed. The bed I lay naked on. *Please God, keep me safe.*

The sun crept into my eyes Sunday morning, waking me. *Where was I...* I looked around and recognized my surroundings. His room was clean, despite the dirty clothes tossed haphazardly around. Empty alcohol bottles decorated the window sill, while the dirty bong graced the desk next to the alarm clock. 8:05 AM. Jackie was asleep on the floor. Her body sprawled out like a giant X. He was lying next to me. Snoring. Disgusting. I never found him attractive, despite all his attempts at getting my attention. He was shorter than

most of our friends, who weren't really that tall themselves. He had the stocky build of an ex-football player and it was evident that he left his fitness regimen back in his high-school glory days. His black hair was matted and horribly contrasted his pale and pasty skin. Despite the fact that he was less than attractive, he was fun and allowed my friends and I to party at his house whenever we pleased. He was like an older brother to us, showing us new drinking games and buying us alcohol when we needed it. I did get the creeps sometimes when he would try flirting with me, but I never once thought that he would actually try anything.

As I rolled over to get out of bed, I froze. My entire body ached. My legs cramped as I swung them over and my groin strained as I attempted to stand. It wasn't the pain that made me stop. My body was completely stripped of all my clothes and I was wearing an oversized men's t-shirt. Nothing else. Quickly trying to recall the events of last night, I went to the bathroom. I drank gulps of water from the sink, trying to ease the dry burning in my throat. Slowly, the events of the previous night trickled in.

I remembered meeting up with everyone in the parking lot of the grocery store. We had already bought bottles and bottles of alcohol and were itching to drink. Instead of waiting until we got to his house, we decided to start right then and there.

"Chug to here. I dare you!" he said, as he pointed to a spot on the Southern Comfort bottle. Not wanting to seem like the rookie I was, I did it. It was easier than I thought, as long as I held my breath.

"Easy." I said. Smug, I handed the bottle back to him.

"Oh yeah? Why don't you try the big kid stuff then," he fished around in the bags behind his driver's seat and pulled out a bottle of Rum 151.

“What’s this?” I asked. Without answering, he unscrewed the cap and held it up to my face. The smell was enough to make my eyes water. I made a fake puking sound and pushed it away.

“Hell no.” I said, as he laughed at my disgust.

“Thought you could handle?” there have been many times where I have let my pride get the best of me. This was definitely one of them. I grabbed the bottle and took a deep breath to prepare myself mentally.

“Get the chaser ready,” I said as I took a swig of the poison. I immediately felt the warmth, no, fire, it was a fire in my throat and I could trace its route all the way through my intestines. It infiltrated my body and it was as if the stench would never leave my skin.

“Oh shit! Yeah, Ash!” I heard my friends saying from the backseat. I loved being able to prove myself to them. I was the youngest by far and hated being treated like a child. I jumped at chances like these to prove that I was capable of hanging with the older kids.

The night went on as normal. We all went back to his house and continued drinking more and more. Every now and then he’d pour me a shot of 151 and I would take it like a champ. Then that’s where it all went dark. I remember needing a glass of water. I went to the kitchen and opened the freezer to grab some ice. The ice smelled like garlic. I didn’t care. I was parched. I threw it in the cup with some water and chugged it. A second later, I was in the bathroom. I flipped up the toilet seat and began violently vomiting. The force was so strong that the putrid liquid splashed off the toilet bowl and into my eye. I recoiled and lay on the floor, the whole process taking all my energy.

I must have passed out, because I remember being dragged outside into the backyard. I was on the grass with my face in a bucket, my friend trying to wet my hair with

a garden hose. *Why is she wetting my hair with a hose?* I didn't care really. I didn't even have the strength to ask out loud. All I wanted to do was lay down. Here. This was a good spot to lie down. I'll just lie down here.

...

I looked in the mirror and groaned. *Fuckkkkkk*. I was not planning on getting that drunk last night. Embarrassed, I found some sweats and walked downstairs. I saw Will in the backyard smoking a cigarette.

"Dude you okay? We were this close to calling an ambulance last night," he said as he handed his already lit cigarette towards me. I took it.

"I really can't remember anything. I don't feel hung-over surprisingly."

"Yeah, cause you got it all out last night!"

We talked for a little while and laughed about how ridiculously belligerent I had been that night. Will explained to me that I shouldn't be embarrassed because I wasn't the only one who had too much fun. Apparently everyone blacked out by midnight, and they had found me passed out in the bathroom with puke all over myself only when someone went to use the bathroom in the middle of the night. *Great...*

"Hey, did Jace try anything? You don't remember huh..."

"I mean, I woke up in his bed, but I don't think so. I can't remember, but we're not like that. He knows we're just friends."

"Yeah I know. Just checking. He just didn't want any help taking care of you that's why."

"Oh... where was Jackie?" that was odd. Usually Jackie is the one always taking care of me and vice versa. We were best friends and always looked out for each other.

“HA! She was so shit faced she fell down the stairs.”

Well, that answered my question. I walked back inside and went upstairs to his room. He and Jackie were awake now, smoking a bowl.

“How’s it hanging?” he asked jokingly.

“I’m fine I think... still kinda out of it, but not going to throw up again, don’t worry.”

“Yeah I don’t think that’d be humanly possible for you... You can use some of my mom’s clothes. She won’t care. All yours are still wet.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

I got my belongings together and threw all my wet clothes in a plastic bag. We all piled in his truck as he dropped us off one by one at our houses. On the drive home, I rehearsed what I’d tell my mom when she saw me.

“What happened to you?! Who’s clothes are those?!”

“Water fight. Jackie’s mom’s. So tired. Going back to bed.”

In high school, a few of my friends took a night drive to the Pali Lookout, the cliff where thousands of ancient Hawaiian warriors fell to their death. They faced their headlights towards the lookout so they were able to see. As soon as they reached the edge, their headlights all simultaneously went out. They ran back to the cars and as they were running, the car alarms began going off. They jumped in the cars, locked the doors and quickly left.

Their headlights didn't turn on until they had made it on to the main road.

Chapter 7:

Pillow Talk

Royal Summit. The top of the world. At least, that's how it felt before. We sat in the car at the top of the hill overlooking the baseball diamond and acres of fields below. The water sparkled off in the distance and the ships became shadows as the sun lowered behind them. Purples and oranges swirled together in the sky while the clouds stood still. Even the wind was silent tonight.

"I wanted to talk to you about something," Wade said, his voice cracking into the quiet. I knew that line was coming. Wade and I had been friends for about a year now and had bonded over our mutual love for pull-apart twizzlers and blue vanilla slushies. Since we lived so close to each other, he gave me a ride to and from school every day, even waiting until I was done with volleyball practice. Today after practice, he asked if I wanted to grab slushies and go for a drive.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm feeling like Royal Summit." I immediately knew that he had something important to talk about. We had all of our important conversations there, on top of the town. Undisturbed. Overlooking everyone and everything like they were smaller than us. It

was where I cried to him when I didn't make the starting line-up on the team, when he got in a fight with his parents, or when he finally told me that he had feelings for me.

"What's up?" I said coolly, trying to keep my nerves from being audible.

"So I heard some things about you and Jace..."

"I told you nothing happened, and Wade, you're not my boyfriend so I don't see what the-" he cut me off.

"No, no. I'm not mad. I just think there's something you need to know."

I was silent. Nothing happened that night. That's what I told myself for the past month. I got drunk. I passed out. End of story. Although I kept telling myself this, I couldn't help but see images and flashbacks. Images of me, naked. My hands covering my chest, his grabbing my wrists. Me, lying on my belly. Face in the pillow trying to wish myself unconscious. It was all a dream I told myself. A nightmare.

"I know you don't believe that nothing happened," Wade said flatly. I had told him briefly about that night, after word had gotten out that the little fourteen-year-old sophomore got drunk and hooked up with the past-his-prime twenty-two year old, at a party. I didn't deny anything or verify anything. "I was drunk," was the answer that left my mouth every time someone would make a snide remark about my recreational activities. While I avoided everyone else's questions out of shame, I confided in Wade. I told him that I didn't remember much from that night, but had I been sober, I would not have even let Jace hold my hand, let alone end up naked and alone in his bed but it was my fault that I had gotten so drunk.

"What did you hear?" I asked.

"It was just me and the guys at his house the other night... and he started to brag."

“About?”

“The things he did to you.” A chill ran down my spine. Those words, like nails against a chalkboard. The things he did, *to me*.

“Ash, we all know he’s a creep. You can tell us. I know what happened. I know what he said. I can vouch for you.”

“There’s nothing to it. We were both drunk. Whatever happened happened.”

“Did you want it to?”

“I was drunk.”

“Stop! Did you?”

“No!” I was shaking now. Trying so hard to hold back tears my neck cramped. I tried to swallow, but it felt like the air was the size of a tennis ball trying to make its way down my throat. There was a loud buzz in the air, infiltrating my thoughts. Wade tried to put his arm around me, and I jumped, pressing myself against the passenger door.

“Sorry...” he said.

“Can we just drop it? It’s easier if we just leave it. Please.”

“Ash, you were a virgin. It’s kind of a big deal.”

“To me, I still am.”

We were both silent for a while. The sun had set now and the fields below were pitch-black. The only light came from the city off in the distance below.

“Let’s keep this between us okay?” I held out my hand to shake on it.

“Ok. Guess that means I can’t kick his ass anytime soon then huh?” We shook on it, and I leaned over, resting my head on his shoulder.

“Thank you.” I said.

The lady in green is a creature that emerges from the water to seek the souls of children. Some say that her child drowned in the river and she ended her life by drowning herself there. She has green seaweed like hair and scaly skin and her presence is accompanied by the foul odor of rotten fish.

Chapter 8:

Mermaids

My car rocked violently as I drove down the unpaved road that led to Ekolu's house. He lived deep in the valley and the roads were some of the ones used back in the old plantation days. The potholes became large pools of muddy water as the rain relentlessly cascaded down; tonight was no exception. I could barely see ten-feet ahead of my car even with my high beams on.

"Pull over for a bit. It's too dangerous to try to get to my house when it's raining like this." I cut the engine and turned the radio up a bit in an attempt to mask the sound of the torrential downpour taking place outside. The soft medley of today's modern Hawaiian hits filled the car. I was on edge. Wahiawa, the town that Ekolu lived in, was known to be haunted. Stories began taking over my thought such as those of the night marchers who were the restless spirits of ancient Hawaiian warriors, the choking ghost who terrorizes people in their sleep and makes them believe they are dying and the lady in green. The lady in green comes from the river. Our parents warned us about the dangers of the mossy murky water. They told us that the water was so polluted that a homeless man fell in and had to get his leg cut off. He ended up dying a few days later. The disgusting water was what led to the legends of the lady in green. They say that you'll know when she's coming.

You'll smell her. One look at her slimy and scaly fish-like body would frighten you dead. Ekolu knew how obsessed I was with ghost stories and would always tease me for believing that ghosts and spirits were real and very much among us.

"You're full of it!" he'd say as he laughed and pulled me into his chest. "But don't worry, I'll kick those ghosts' ass if they try to get near you!" I felt safe in his arms. He was six feet tall and built to dominate in any sport he played. He was the shining star of the football and baseball team and his only real dilemma going into senior year was what sport he'd take offers for in college. We had been dating for about six months now, and I had never been happier. We spent all of our free time together, sat next to each other at study hall, supported each other whole-heartedly in sports and competitions, and got along well with each other's families. We were perfect. He was perfect. Everything felt right and I finally believed that I could be genuinely happy.

"You're scared aren't you? Lady in green is coming for you!" he teased as he tickled me.

"Stop! Yes I'm scared! The river is *right* there! She's from the river *remember?*" I respected the local folklore and hated that he took it so lightly. *What if she heard us and wanted to prove she was real?* Thoughts like these might seem ridiculous, but I am a firm believer in the supernatural.

Ekolu recognized my anger as I pouted in the driver's seat. He reached his arm around, and my head wound up resting on his shoulder as he held me.

"Aww, I'm sorry. I know how you feel about that stuff," he chuckled as he kissed my forehead.

"It's fine," I said, hugging him back.

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

As I leaned against him, I could feel his heart beat increase. The skin on his neck was warm and pulsed against my forehead. I looked up and met his gaze.

“What?” I said. I felt my face turn red as I smiled and quickly buried my face in his chest.

“Nothing. I was just thinking about how lucky I am.” His hand caressed my cheek and lifted my chin so our faces were nearly touching. He leaned in and kissed me gently. I couldn’t help but smile as he did. My heart raced and I thought it would burst through my chest. Warmth radiated from his body and melted into mine as he pulled me closer and ran his hands down my spine.

“Want to go in the back seat while we wait? Probably easier to cuddle,” he said with his adorable smile.

I hopped in the back and he followed tackling me into the seat and bear-hugging me like a little girl. I was giggling uncontrollably as we play wrestled. Somehow, I ended up on my back, with him on top. We were both out of breath from laughing so much by now.

“Are you going to stop kicking me now?” he said, as he leaned over me, his legs straddling my body.

“Yes!” I was still coming down off of a fit of laughter, trying to catch my breath. He leaned in and kissed me and didn’t stop. I didn’t want him to. My mind was a whirlwind. I couldn’t grab hold of a single thought for what felt like eternity. The world stopped for us that night.

This is really happening. I thought as his hand traced his way down my chest, not stopping until he reached the zipper of my jeans.

“Do you want to...?” He asked, as he looked me in the eye. He was a virgin. He didn’t know it, but I was not. Yet, he would be the first boy I *chose* to be with.

“Yes.”

I was confident. I wanted this.

...

It definitely wasn’t all that sex is hyped up to be. I guess it was because we were both highly inexperienced and male teenage hormones cut this story short. It was messy. Sweaty. Painful.

Painful. As I pulled my jeans on carefully, to avoid making the pain worse, I remembered that night, nearly three years ago now. The heat flooded to my face as my breath escaped me. I suddenly forgot how to breathe. There was a cracking in my chest- at least that’s what it felt like. I felt water hit my still bare thigh. I felt the tears now. The tears formed rivers into my past and the water took me to places I never wanted to revisit. The lady in green forced all those memories in front of my. All the questions, accusations and name calling that I had buried deep at the bottom of the water, now began to resurface. The stench of it all made me want to puke.

...

“Oh you’d hook up with Levi, but not me?” When I told Keenan I wasn’t ready to sleep with him.

Or, *“Ash, weren’t you like the first to lose it out of all of us?”* When my friends and I went camping.

"Of all people, Levi... Really?"

"Not surprised. She was probably shit-faced."

"She sleeps with all those guys."

...

"Are you okay?" Ekoru held my face in his hands and tried to wipe my tears. I didn't look at him. I couldn't. His hands gently and slowly found mine that were crossed across my chest, just like that night, trying to hold it all in. He pruned my arms open and pulled me into him.

"Can you please tell me what's wrong? Did you not want to? I'm so sorry." His voice cracked.

"I'm sorry. It's not you. I just remembered something really bad from a long time ago."

"Tell me. Please."

He let me catch my breath. I felt nauseated and my head still spun, but I felt I owed him an explanation. He played with my hair while I relayed to him that night, and the way it haunted me and permeated every aspect of my life. After I was done, he was silent.

Shit. I thought. *There goes that relationship.* I had lied to him. I told him that I was a virgin. It was something special that we were supposed to share.

"I heard rumors, but I believed what you told me."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be." His voice was cold and I could feel his arms tense up yet, he still held me.

"You're mad aren't you?" I asked.

“Not at you. Not even a little bit. But yes, I don’t think I’ve ever felt this angry.” I pulled away from him just enough to see his face. His eyes were closed and his jaw was clenched. Fear started to well up in my gut.

“You know I’d go right now to his house and fuck him up if you told me to.”

“No. That is definitely not what I want. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Really should’ve told me sooner. I feel horrible now...”

“Don’t. I wanted it to happen, I just didn’t know I’d feel like this after.”

“Like what?”

I couldn’t answer, and I never did. Not because I didn’t know the answer, but because I knew it all too well. Sex had lost its value to me. I didn’t feel love while it was happening. I never would. A good friend of mine who shared my past told me something that would always burn in the back of my mind: “Once someone forcefully takes something from you, your ability to give it becomes pointless.”

You will feel a strange tickling sensation around your neck. Then the tickling will turn into an aggressive pressure. All of a sudden you are awoken from your sleep because you cannot breathe. Someone is choking you. Just as you think you are going to pass out from lack of oxygen, the feeling subsides only after hearing dark chuckling around you.

Chapter 9:

Island Fever

Receiving my acceptance to college on the mainland was a breath of fresh air. Yes, it would be exponentially cheaper to attend the University of Hawaii and be granted in-state tuition, but there was no way that I could survive another year trapped on this island. It

seemed that ever since my freshman year of high school, the rising ocean levels were shrinking the island more and more and I could feel my surroundings creating even tighter grips around me. I needed to leave.

When I was younger, my dad and I would go to the beach every Saturday. He was a surfer and always took to the waves at Waikiki Beach while I played in the sand and splashed around in the shore break. Looking back now, I realized that he only went to that beach so he could bring me along. While many avid surfers take to the thrilling waves of the North Shore, my dad settled for surfing the one to two foot faces that were in Waikiki. He would never admit it now, but I think that we went there so I could play in the water and he could teach me how to catch waves of my own. There was no need for him to worry about my safety on the shore while he was out in the ocean. He was confident in the tide and I, that I would remain safe. I'm not sure if it's because of global warming or whatever, that the tide has risen so much in recent years.

In the days that my dad and I made Waikiki beach our stomping grounds, the sand stretched far out from the sidewalks of the infamous Waikiki strip. It seemed as if miles of sand separated the strip from the water. Sometimes, on very hot and sunny days, I'd make my dad carry me to the water because my feet would burn on the scorching and fiery sand. We'd park on the street and leave everything in the car- slippers included. I'd run along behind my dad, crossing the street and bounding across the asphalt waiting for my dad to catch up. There was always a patch of grass or two that I could stop to rest my soles on, but once we hit the sand, it was all a mental game. My feet turned red and my feet would blister until I got older and my skin toughened to withstand the heat. If I whined enough, my dad would shift his board to his left arm and sling me over his shoulder with his right, then

throw me into the cold saltwater once we reached the shore. We would practice swimming laps on the beach and he'd propel me into the water, using his arms as a springboard. After about an hour of splashing around, he would tell me to wait, while he paddled out and caught a few waves. I always managed just fine on my own, catching the little baby shore breaks and running around in the sand. It never felt like much time had passed when I saw my dad in the distance, making his way back to shore.

Those days were my favorite ones-- easily, the brightest memories of my childhood. Now, whenever I go back to Waikiki Beach, it seems unrecognizable. New buildings block the path of the sun, concrete stages for concerts take up beach space, and the shore has risen so far up that it feels like there is only a few feet of beach left. If I were a little kid, I wouldn't need my dad to carry me across the burning sand anymore. There was barely any left. I've seen the news anchors talk about it time and time again: they bring in man-made sand every year now to Waikiki beach. Fake sand by the truckload is dumped onto the beach now. It doesn't affect me much anymore. I rarely make it out to Waikiki, and my dad stopped surfing since then. I go to the North Shore with my friends, and my dad claims he's too old and tired to surf. Nonetheless, the island is shrinking and I could feel it suffocating me. Its hands around my neck, during my last few years residing there.

A man was staying overnight in the Queen's hospital after a car accident. In the middle of the night he heard rustling in the closet. He cried out for the nurse, but before anyone could come, a deranged woman with a hanger emerged and began beating his plastered leg. When the nurse finally came in, the lady was gone. "This used to be the maternity ward," the nurse said.

"Her baby died at birth."

Chapter 10:

Word Vomit

She told me that she dreamt of killing him. She told me that last night, she woke in tears because she could not stop herself from having so much hatred for another human being.

"I've never... ever, felt that way before," was what she told me in the car that day. I don't remember where we were going, or what day it was. The only thing that I recall is staring out the passenger window at the unusually dry and desolate land of the west side of my island of O'ahu. I grew up there. The west side is always known to be bright and sunny year round, with the occasional chance of rain, but that month, they saw less than half an inch. Headlines about brush fires and drought plagued local newspapers and news programs. Thankfully, I'd leave to go to Oregon in just a few months where it would be lush and green and far away from here.

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"What happened?" I asked. I tried keeping my composure, but I think we both knew that neither of us would be able to do that in this conversation. It had not been long since I had finally told her about that night, nearly four years ago. Only a week before, I finally told her why I was so different. It was an odd conversation to say the least.

“You and your friends are so naïve sometimes it scares me. You seem like you know what you’re doing now... but I don’t know.”

We had been talking about my habits of going out and staying out late with my friends. I definitely had been staying out later with the group of friends that I was hanging around with, but they were definitely different than the naïve friends that she was referencing. I had not associated myself with Jackie and those girls since that night.

“I don’t surround myself with those people anymore.”

This conversation about trust and responsibility seemed to go on for a while and my mom kept badgering me about how I did not know anything and I was too inexperienced to understand what could happen. She finally asked,

“But, how do I know that? You’re still so young.”

Frustrated, and not thinking this thoroughly, I blurted out,

“Because I fucking learned the hard way, okay?!”

I immediately regretted every breath that left my mouth. My eyes focused in on the dashboard in front of me, and my body stayed still. My heel started tapping as it does when I get nervous and my face said it all. *Did you really just say that?* I thought to myself. For years I had kept that night a secret and never wanted to speak of it again. I was unsure about so many things that happened that night and I thought that it was best to just push it under the rug. There were so many other things to look forward to and it really wasn’t a big deal. In my head, it was my fault anyway. There was nothing anyone could do for me and there was nothing that would help the situation. It was pointless. Talking about it was a waste of time. These were the things that I told myself for years.

“How so?” My mom asked calmly. Too calmly... usually, if I were to say anything like that, my mom would pounce and hound me until I broke and told her everything. This time was different. I felt completely uncomfortable because I did not know how to react.

“I... I don’t know. I’m just not stupid.”

“Is that why you stopped hanging out with Jackie them?”

Shit... What am I supposed to say to that? Yes? Then she’ll ask why. No. She’ll still ask why!

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You know you can tell me anything. I’ve told you about my younger years and things I wasn’t proud of. You can do the same.”

She was so calm. This woman is never calm. By never, I mean *never*. This is the woman who screamed at my neighbors at two o’clock in the morning for blasting their television. This is the woman who tackled me, her own daughter, for a Hershey’s chocolate bar. This is the woman who has been the only person strong enough to deal with me for the past seventeen years. Yet, her voice showed no hint of anger or impatience as she asked me gently to tell her what had happened. So I did.

After I told her everything, we pulled over on the side of the road. It was the park that I had taken my senior portraits at, just a few months prior. The grass went on for miles in front of us and the parking lot in this section was empty. She cried, but she cried quietly.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” she asked.

It almost felt that she was more disappointed in me for keeping this secret from her than she was for letting this situation happen. I shrugged and wept as I wiped away my tears with my shoulder. I wanted to show her that it wasn’t a big deal. That it didn’t bother

me anymore. What I didn't realize was how much it did affect me and how much it had been tormenting me for the last few years. She reached and handed me a tissue and that's when I cried. I cried so openly in front of her that I'm sure she was startled. I cried for the years that I kept it a secret. I cried for the years that I had lost with my mother and she cried as any mother would cry seeing her child in pain.

The pool at the bottom of Waimea Falls is haunted by an ancient entity. In order to appease it, the falls and the pool have a cleansing ritual every three years. In the ritual, the pool drowns its victim and the body is found three days later in one of the many pods at the bottom of the pool.

Chapter 11:

Snow Melt

"Hurry up before someone tries to get in!" Wesley hissed at me as he held the door to the makeshift garage bedroom shut. I ran into the room, hopped over the radiating space heater and found three little white lines waiting on the cover of a tattered Economics textbook.

"Yours is the one on the left." *Of course... the biggest one.* Although I'm less than five feet tall and barely one hundred pounds, I had the capacity of taking large amounts of chemical substances into my body. I rolled the dollar bill up creating the tunnel that would take the white crystalline powder from the book to my brain. In one swift motion I closed my right nostril and inhaled deeply through my left, sweeping every last bit of the powder particles as the dollar bill skimmed across the textbook.

“Whoo! Let’s go!” I exclaimed. My eyes watered a bit as we made our way back to the chaos of the party. The second we stepped foot outside the garage, I could hear the music from the basement grow louder. By the time we had walked the ten feet to the front door, the noise was so loud that I couldn’t even hear myself think. It was a cacophony of drum and bass, loud enough to burst the drums in my ears. I didn’t care though. I was ready to get crazy. I *needed* to get crazy.

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That night when I showed up at Wesley’s I was extremely exhausted from going to class all day. I was taking Adderall to stay awake during my 8:30 am statistics class, but even after a few shots of espresso the effects of the amphetamines would completely wear off by mid to late afternoon if I was lucky. Usually I’m always game for some beers or cocktails, but tonight I felt like I was an empty vessel. My brain had long ago fled its home in my skull and was eagerly attempting to find some peace and quiet. I sat on the sofa staring at the eight inches that separated my feet. Focusing in on the nothingness on the floor, the dirty and rotten wooden floorboards returned my blank stare. Doctors claim that only males have the capacity to go to the “nothing box,” and are able to have no conscious thought process, but I beg to differ. I was definitely in the nothing box, and I was finding myself there more and more frequently. I practically lived in the nothing box.

“Ash. Dude, are you okay?” the question yanked me back to earth like a bungee cord.

“Yeah, what the heck! You’re not even drinking.” My roommate Courtney was very observant of my habits and she knew that if I wasn’t having a drink, then something was off.

“I’m just exhausted. Long day at school.”

“Want some molly?” Wesley asked. The drug was not new to me and up until recently I had never considered it a “hard drug.” The kids at my high school popped little tiny pills named after cartoons like they were colorful pieces of candy; green Flintstones, pink pokeballs, or white diamonds. With names like those, how could they possibly be Schedule I controlled substances?

“Sure. Just like one point or so though.”

“Alright, let’s go to the garage.”

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People crowded the entrance to the house now. Girls in tight jeans and crop tops leaned against the kitchen counter on both sides making a human hallway in the entranceway. Red solo cups in hand, they maneuvered and slyly snuck closer to the cute boys next to them in order to make room for me and others making their way indoors. The humidity in the room was suffocating and I struggled getting the wet oxygen to my lungs. After wriggling and half dancing my way through the sea of drunkards, I found the cooler containing the cocktails for the night. I grabbed a cup and ladled in the bright blue liquid until the cup could hold no more. I made my way down to the basement to dance as I usually did every Friday night.

As I danced with my friends and mingled, I could feel the molly kicking in. I became much more awake and sociable, but something was different. I felt a heightened sense of awareness. It was as if every sound, movement and touch was a slap in the face. I felt a surge of energy and focus pulsing through my veins. The lights were aggressively strobing and my eyes tried their best to keep up with the rapid movements around me. My mouth was dry from the adrenaline sucking all hydration from my body except for a bitter drip at

the back of my throat. I couldn't keep still. I felt as if I were on a mission, but the thing was... I didn't know for what.

The heightened state of mind did not dissipate after an hour or so which surprised me. Usually when I take molly, I only peak for fifteen minutes. Usually I dance, I dance harder then, I feel relaxed and have a drink to bring myself back down. I was definitely having a few drinks but the alertness was still there. It was as if I hadn't even taken a sip of alcohol. I knew something was off, but I was enjoying myself. I felt great. Invincible. I needed to run out in the freezing cold rain, just because I could. Just then, Wesley found me.

"How are you feeling?!" His blue eyes were bugging out of his head as he yelled in my face, his hands gripping my shoulders.

"Actually... Pretty fucking great!"

"Thought so! I put a little extra something in there to perk ya up a bit."

"What?! What was it?"

"Just a little bit of cocaine. Nothing too strong!"

I should have been furious. My friend who I trusted just drugged me. But, because of the influence of the happy-go-lucky molly and the immense high I felt because of the cocaine laced in, I couldn't bring myself to even feel a twinge of anger. This was my kind of cocktail.

"HA! Sweet!" I said as I continued on with my night of dancing and drinking.

The next morning I was exhausted, but the following day was even worse. It was a Monday. 8:30am statistics and I met once again. I dragged my body out of bed and made my way over to my desk drawer. I popped open the tin of Cherry Sucrets that held my Adderall. I took one, and then a half of another for good measure and walked to class.

Thirty minutes into class and I was still exhausted. *Why isn't it working?* I had thought it was because I was so utterly drained from the weekend, but the same thing happened on Tuesday and Wednesday. There was just nothing that was working for me and I was beginning to fall behind in my classes. With only a few weeks left in the semester and finals quickly approaching, I knew that I had to do something about my lack of energy or motivation for that matter. I deliberated the options I had, and realized I had no other choice. Unable to function, I talked to Wesley.

"I need to buy some coke from you."

"What really? How much do you need?"

I bought a gram from him and it lasted about two weeks. I was not taking enough to be in a crazy party mode, but just enough to stay alert and focused in all my classes. It really aided in my workout regimen as well. Everything was going well in life! I was doing well in school, losing weight and had all the energy in the world to hang out with my friends. I kept my foolproof routine up, but I was not prepared for what my body had in store for me.

It was a weekday. Normal school day. I would wake up; snort a line, then go to class. Except today was different. I couldn't move. I felt as if I weighed a million pounds and someone was trying to hold me down; pull me deeper and deeper into the mattress. I tried to wiggle myself out of bed, but every time I tried to move, I began crying. Not tears of pain. Just tears, but they would not stop. They flowed from my eyes like calm streams and rivers. I didn't know what to do so I just stayed in bed. Not moving, I stared at the side of my smooth wooden closet. I was in the nothing box and did not know how to find my way out this time. I stayed there for hours before I fell back asleep. When I woke up, I didn't know what hit me.

It was dark out. My body ached from staying in the same position for what could've been hours or days. Time was a completely foreign concept to me. I was able to move a little bit, so I rolled over and felt around my bed for my phone. The blinding LED light from my phone's screen pierced my sensitive eyes and I squinted trying to make out the notifications on my phone. Missed calls, text messages, and other social media alerts flooded my home screen. Most of the missed calls and texts were from my boyfriend at the time, and from the many unanswered text messages, it seemed he went from confused, to angry to desperately worried. I was keeping my energy source a secret from those around me. He had an idea of what I was doing, but not the full extent of my habits... yet. I gave him a call back and within minutes he walked into my dorm room, flipped on the lights and pulled a chair out.

"We need to talk."

Every time I drive past the large two story house in Mauka, I think of the family that was killed there. A man took a shotgun two his wife and two children then later himself. People still hear screams coming from it.

Chapter 12:

"I'm Back Bitches, -A"

When I finally touched down on the tarmac at Honolulu International Airport, a wave of excitement passed over me. As soon as the captain announced that cell phones were allowed to be used, I quickly sent out a mass text to all my family and friends exclaiming, "IM HOME!" I had made it through my first year of college away from home. It was a great year filled with many ups and downs, and now it was finally time to relax. I thought of the sandy beaches, laying in the shade of the trees and jumping in the cold blue

waters. The humidity greeted me like an old friend as soon as the cabin doors were opened and I felt at home.

After my mom had picked me up, a moment filled with lots of hugs and squealing like little girls, we hurried to our home in Mililani Town so I could get settled. When I walked through the doorway and looked around, it was like I never left. My mom was still the messy pack rat she had always been, and my dad still was “in-the-process” of renovating.

“Geez, glad to see you guys cleaned for my arrival,” I said sarcastically.

I fell on the floor laughing when I opened the door to my bedroom. My parents had cleaned my room and dusted, but they also cleaned the entire house and scoured every nook and cranny for every toy I had ever possessed while living here. Every stuffed animal, doll, and play-thing was stacked on my bed, as if they were all awaiting for my arrival home.

“Your dad missed you,” my mom said as she scooted past me into her bedroom. I could see that.

“I’m so hungry! Can we get ramen?!” Even though it was over eighty degrees out, my favorite food in the world is a good bowl of traditional Japanese ramen. Luckily, it was my mom’s favorite too.

“Genki?” she asked

“Genki!” Genki Ramen is hands down the best ramen shop you will ever come across. It’s cheap, it’s fast, it’s delicious and the waitresses yell at each other in Chinese constantly, putting on a comical show for customers. I showered and changed my stale

airplane clothes and hopped in the car. My mom hates driving so she tossed me the keys and I got in the driver's seat.

"What a warm welcome. Aren't you happy to have your chauffer back?" I joked.

Genki was located at the Town Center, only five minutes from our house. During the drive there, I began telling my mom all the little stories from college and gave her a run-down of the friends that I had become close with. We laughed and joked just like old times, like I never left. I could tell she missed me, because she too had so many stories and so much gossip about family and friends. Not having me around, she only had my dad to babble to and he wasn't much of a gossip queen. I felt warm here, literally because of the heat, but also because of the love and familiarity that was slowly creeping back into me.

The town center was always crowded since it was the main shopping center in our town and the last suburban town before the infamous North Shore countryside. I perused the rows of cars wondering if I'd recognize any as I always did. Although Mililani was densely populated, it was small enough to run into people you knew everywhere you went. As I searched for parking my heart stopped and my body forgot how to work.

"Why'd you skip that stall? Park there," my mom instructed me.

She was pointing to a stall next to a large black truck, with custom chrome wheels. I knew this truck all too well. There were stickers of heavy metal bands plastered on the back window and our high school's tassel hanging from the rearview mirror. It was unmistakable. If I wasn't sure, his license plate said so. The four large letters stared at me.

JACE.

"Mom. I don't feel well. Let's go to the other shopping center."

"Why? What's wrong?"

My hands went numb and my feet forgot how to work. My arms detached themselves from my hands that were glued to the steering wheel. My legs locked up. Oxygen couldn't get to my lungs. My eyes fixated on the dashboard. My vision began to go blurry.

My mom threw the car in park and coaxed me into switching with her. She used a soothing tone, something very different for my mom. Somehow, I wound up in the passenger seat as we pulled into a stall at another shopping center up the road. The engine turned off and I took a deep breath as all my back muscles released, sounding like pop rocks candy you just threw in your mouth.

"Do you need to go home?" my mom asked. I shook my head no.

"What triggered you?"

"Did you see someone?"

"It was his truck." I said flatly. She was silent. We sat there for a few minutes then went inside to eat. My mind was clouded and my body was exhausted from panicking. My mom made small talk and did her best to keep my mind off the black ford at the Town Center parking lot. No matter what she said, I realized that truck and that name would haunt me for days to come.

His name was Sam. Ki'i said that Sam wanted her to himself and she'd spend hours playing in front of the wall with him. No one else could see Sam. One night, my aunt felt a presence run across the room and as she turned around, she saw a long and stringy figure running into Ki'i's room. She found out later that their apartment was an old asylum.

Chapter 13:

Val

I have a companion. My companion is with me always, even when I sleep. By no means did I choose this companion and I never once wished that I had this companion in my life. Nevertheless, that companion never left and was right by my side that foggy night in the fall of 2013.

That night was particularly cold. I was still living in the dorms and had a large window that overlooked a parking lot outside of Lizzy Hall. I lived in a conjoined single that was really just a large room with a wall separating my roommate and me. The door that separated us didn't even have a lock. *So much for privacy.* I looked out the window and couldn't see a thing due to the thick white mist hovering over the city of Portland.

It was almost midnight, but I was feeling restless after a long day. There wasn't anything that went wrong, but I must have pushed myself a little too hard and now the adrenaline didn't want to go away. I tried to relax by streaming online the radio from back home in Hawaii, the soothing voices and medleys reminding me of the warmth and calm of the islands. The strings of the guitar and ukulele flowing together to create a beautiful harmony that sounds just as peaceful as the shore-break in the summer looks.

As hard as I tried to relax I began to feel my heart start beating faster and faster. I could feel my face getting hot, my hands go numb, and all the muscles in my back

simultaneously tense up making my motions stiff and limited. A wave of nausea washed over me as I climbed into bed and practiced the breathing exercises that my doctor had taught me. *Inhale, hold, exhale, repeat.* It wasn't working; I began to panic. I reached over to my drawer with shaking hands and desperately pulled out a small bottle of pills. I swallowed one and waited for the Valium to make its way into my bloodstream and let my nervous system know that it needed to relax. Nothing. Tears were forming in my eyes from the fear that everything was closing in around me. *I needed more.* I took another pill, then another. At the time, I was only supposed to be taking two a day, so I was confused and worried since it wasn't working. I sat with my back against the wall, holding my knees to my chest, trying with everything in me to hold in the screams of terror that so badly needed to be let out. I called my boyfriend Reid who knew about my panic attacks. "Help me," I said in between sobs and clenched teeth. "Ash, breathe. You know how to handle this. Are you in your room?"

I must have mumbled yes or said something alarming in my hazy state because he said he was on his way and would be here as quickly as he could. I was so embarrassed and angry with myself for calling him and not being able to handle this on my own. My hands were cramping from clenching my fists too tightly in order to stop the tremors that were running through my body; My anger and frustration building, leading me to cry even more, less quietly. I was sure my roommate could hear me. *What would she think? She's going to think I'm insane. She'll tell everybody. Maybe I am crazy.* I took more pills, maybe four more, in the hope that it would calm me down and wash the craziness out. *Where is he?* I thought. *It's so foggy... What if he crashed? Oh my god, it's all my fault!*

My eyes slowly opened, but I didn't recall falling asleep. I awoke in a cold bed with scratchy sheets and tubes and wires attached to the back of my hand and my arm. There were no windows in the room and the artificial lighting was so bright that my head began to throb. Or maybe it was the man screaming bloody murder in the room next to mine. *Geez what's up with him, maybe his leg got cut off.* Disoriented as I was, I realized I had wound up in the hospital. I looked down to find Reid sitting in a chair to my left, resting his head on the edge of the bed. I didn't want to tap him and wake him up because I was a little confused and embarrassed to ask what was going on, but my throat felt like sandpaper when I tried to swallow and I needed water. I pretended to cough loudly until he finally lifted his head and looked at me and passed me a tiny paper cup with some water in it. It was painful to even lift the cup to my mouth, my joints creaking and muscles burning like I was ninety years old rather than seventeen. Pretending to ignore the pain, I cracked a smile and let out a casual, "what's up?" At this moment I was so relaxed -and ridiculously drugged up- to the point that you could have punched me in the face and I would've apologized to you. Reid obviously didn't think anything was worth smiling over because he looked at me with what seemed like pain, but mostly disappointment. "Why did you do it?" he asked. I didn't know what he was talking about. I could feel the hurt in his words and it made me feel like the worst person in the world even though I did not yet know what "it" was. Before I could say anything, a nurse walked in.

"Hi Ashley, could I ask you a few questions, privately?" the nurse asked. Reid got up and walked outside while the nurse continued to ask questions about how I was doing, whether I felt sick, what was I doing before the panic attack, whether I *knew* I had a panic attack, blah, blah, blah. I responded to all her questions quickly and was almost zoning out

when she asked, "Was this a suicide attempt?" My heart rate increased and I could hear the beeping noise from the machine quicken as well, which just annoyed me even more than her question did. Yes, I hate my companion, and at times I hate myself because of it, but why do people insist that I think I am better off dead? Are they trying to fill my head with these ideas on purpose? *Of course I didn't want to kill myself, what a dumb question.* "No. It wasn't," I replied as hostile as someone high could sound. She asked me why I took more than the prescribed amount and I went off angrily trying to explain that, "it was an accident and the stupid things weren't working anyway." She tried to tell me that I hadn't given the medicine time to work or whatever and I blocked her out. I obviously knew that I should have waited longer, but one second feels like a minute and one minute feels like one hour. Why does she have to make me feel even worse? I have things that are more important to take care of than being lectured about something I already know, but will probably not be able to control anyway. My heart kept dropping farther and farther into my stomach as the meaning of Reid's question started to sink in.

The doctor wanted to monitor me a little longer and make sure that I wasn't suicidal. "We'll have to keep you hospitalized for two weeks if the doctor feels you are a danger to yourself or others." I began panicking again. *There's no way I can stay in here! I have school. I'm not going to be a mental patient!* After more questioning and waiting, they went through my records and saw I was under the care of a physician and psychologist. Finally reassuring them of my sanity, they discharged me at four a.m. More than enough time to get myself together, make it to my eight a.m. class.

...

My companion's name is Anxiety. I began showing symptoms in high school, but would constantly try to deny it. My mom at first thought that I was an overly self-conscious teenager who would cry and worry over the tiniest things such as being too late or too early for a volleyball tournament or school function. She eventually realized things were getting out of control. "Mom I can't believe we left so early! I'll have to be by myself for ten minutes before anyone shows up! Why would you do this to me!" Or on the other hand, "No mom, you have to turn around. I'm not walking in there late! Everyone will stare at me!" I'd sit in the car and cry. Eventually my mom would have to turn the car around and drive us both back home fearing that I'd have an attack if she made me get out of the car.

I refused treatment and by the time I had begun my freshman year of college, things were spiraling out of control. I was constantly worried about every little thing and trying to balance school with an anxiety disorder began taking its toll on my physical health. I would be in class, usually chemistry or calculus, and would look down to see my body covered in disgusting, bumpy hives that would just trigger my anxiety even more. It was to the point where I couldn't stop scratching whatever skin was exposed and available at the time. If I wasn't scratching, I'd chew and bite on my lips until they were raw and bleeding and once my lips were ruined, I would move to biting the inside of my cheek until I had painful sores all over me. Even in my sleep my anxiety would haunt me. Incessant chattering of my teeth; continued scratching, digging my nails so deep into my own skin I'd wake up and wonder why parts of my arms and legs were scratched and sometimes bruised.

During this time, Reid and I had been dating for about a year and were at the stage where we never wanted to spend a second apart even if that meant him saving me from myself in my sleep. It became evident at that point that I needed to do something and Reid

along with my parents convinced me to finally try medication. I was put on three different prescriptions: Celexa, Prednisone and Valium. Celexa had no effect on me except for these painful random shocks that felt like an electrical current had shot through my brain, leaving my face scrunched and eyes crossed for a split second. Prednisone only made my anxiety worse since it was a stimulant and caused me to pull an unhealthy amount of all-nighters. Valium had worked the first few times, but my body began to get used to it and I would just take more, which in turn led me to the ER that night.

My mom and I are unbelievably close, almost like sisters. I called her after I had been discharged and gotten some rest before my class started. In Hawaii, they are two hours behind so it worked out perfectly and I was able to catch her right before she walked out the door.

“Hiiiiii mommmmm...” were the words dragged from my mouth, reluctant to say more.

“What, did, you, dooooo?” She replied, talking to me like I was one of the first graders she taught who just did something naughty. I guess after seventeen years she could now read the tone in my voice.

I explained to her the events of that night and assured her that it was unintentional, it was an accident, I didn’t want it to happen, it won’t happen again. I was doing my best; dancing around the heavy and ominous word until she finally forced me to say it awkwardly almost as a promise to the both of us.

“No mom. I did not nor will I ever try to commit suicide.”

I knew she was crying. She didn’t say it but I could hear her voice breaking up, her words becoming forced with every sharp breath she took. I hated doing this to my mom

even if it was an accident. I felt like I had let my biggest fan down. She told me that she was glad I was okay and that I needed to call more often because she was worried, as any mom would be. I told her I missed her and would be fine.

“Love you Mitsue,” she always uses my middle name when she knows I need a little more love and comfort.

“Love you too mom, I’ll call Dad when he gets off of work.”

My mom was the first of many people that I would have to have this conversation with, and it never got any easier dealing with the looks and tones of disappointment. Seeing what my actions were doing to those around me was one of my biggest motivations to be positive. I never wanted those who cared about me to look at me with such pity and disappointment, or cry tears over the harm I was causing myself. What I had yet to do was accept the fact that I had anxiety and that didn’t make me abnormal or “crazy.” What I needed to do was accept it and really make a commitment to myself and to those who cared about me to take control of the issue. I told my psychologist that I would do whatever it took to not rely on medicine and to stand on my own two feet even if that meant embracing my companion with open arms.

Now, when someone asks me to hang out and have some fun, my first thought isn’t, *what if I panic and have a horrible time?* It’s usually more along the lines of, *yes! I can finally wear that new top and lipstick that I bought last time!* Yes, I can wear lipstick, and it will stay there because I don’t feel the need to bite my lips off anymore. The little things like being able to wear lipstick, not having to completely hide my skin from myself or worry about hurting myself in my sleep are the things that keep reminding me of how much progress I am making. I am no longer ashamed of myself. I still do have my quirks, and my anxiety

hasn't magically disappeared, but I am strong enough to admit it and honestly I am proud of myself for that alone.

Pele disguised as an old woman went to a wealthy family's home and asked for food. The mother told her that they had none to spare, as the harvest was not good this year. Pele left angrily. A few days later, their home was destroyed by lava.

Chapter 14:

Mafia

She exudes brute strength, hard-earned wisdom and a childlike love all at the same time. My grandma is the walking definition of the word survivor, and over the years my family has hailed her for that. It still amazes onlookers as she carries her ridiculous load of groceries consisting of a few gallons of milk, cases of Pepsi and about thirty T.V. Dinners, all on her own. My mom and I cower and hide in the car because we are tired of getting dirty looks for making this eighty-year-old hunchback who weighs eighty pounds carry it all on her own. The thing is that we would be more than willing to help her; she won't let us.

I haven't seen her in one year, yet it looks as if the decades have taken their toll. My dad warned me.

He said, "Don't be surprised when you see your grandma when you come home."

"Why?"

"Imagine the number 7. Now imagine your grandma's back bent into that shape."

"Geez dad!"

He laughs. "I'm serious. I shouldn't be laughing but you know how she is, she don't care. She's still living off coffee and Pepsi. It's impossible to get her to eat or drink anything else."

“How’s her health?”

“Physically? She’s not going anywhere for a loooong time.”

My grandma is living with my Aunty now because she is much too old to be living on her own, and lo and behold the earth would explode if we dared to try and put her in a nursing home again. (The one time we did, the social worker ran away as she called the cops after my grandma pulled a knife on her, but that’s a story for another time). My Uncle John cared for her previously. His attempt was the most successful, holding out for a little over ten years. My mom lasted a good two months before my dad nearly went crazy from these two little Okinawan women yelling at each other twenty-four seven. At least her attempt wasn’t the worst. My Uncle Tom gave up before she set foot in his house.

When my boyfriend Reid and I arrived at my auntie’s house in Hawaii, my entire family had prepped him on what was to come. This was his first time meeting my grandma and she has never approved of any male that her daughters or granddaughters brought home. “Just don’t say a word.” “If she’s mean, that’s because she likes you.” “Just nod and smile.” What actually happened shocked us all.

We walked into the house and sat in the kitchen eagerly awaiting her entrance. Everyone’s eyes fixed on the hallway as we heard her slippers smack against the tiled floor.

“Ash-u-deeeeeeeee!!” Her larger than life smile melted me as I went over to hug her. It was awkward. I had not yet figured out how to maneuver my body to fit with her hunch, so instead we settled for an awkward side- hug and pats on the back.

“Obachan (Grandma)! This is Reid.” Everyone quietly stared at her.

“Oh! Big Boy!” This was all she said. She walked toward the couch to sit and her eyes grew wide. Then, she he bobbed her head up and down in approval. Relieved, we all sat

around the couches and began to catch up and “talk story” as usual. Even though my stretches away from home get longer and longer, family is the one thing I can count on to remain the same.

...

The term family or *familia* actually originated in the early fifteenth century meaning, “servants of a household.” According to the online etymology dictionary, the term was rarely used to describe parents and their children; for that, the term *domus* was used. Thank god we don’t go around proclaiming, “I love my domus.” I think family sounds much better. The term *familia* eventually grew to include all members in the household including servants, boarders, lodgers or children. It was simply a collective group of people who were living under the same roof.

Today, there are many different variations of the definition of family. According to Merriam-Webster online, the definition of family can range from, “a group of persons of common ancestry; clan,” all the way to, “a unit of a crime syndicate (as the mafia) operating within a geographical area.” Whether we are a clan or mafia, we are a group who will stick together because we are family. We’re supposed to stay together, always, right?

...

When Grandma retreated back into her bedroom the adults started to talk about the serious matter at hand. My grandma is schizophrenic and has severe dementia that is only getting worse. To be completely honest, it is a miracle that she remembered who I was or even who my mom was. The doctors are still baffled that although she is losing it altogether, her memory of her family still persists. That just makes the decision even harder for us.

My grandma is a wanderer. She always has been, from her younger days in Okinawa, wandering the islands and barely escaping the horrors from World War II, to landing in Hawaii with her children and starting a new life after losing her husband in the Vietnam War. Even in her later years we would get calls from her: "Take me to airport. Going Vegas." She definitely can't travel alone anymore, and we are all so busy with our own lives that taking a few weeks off and holding her hand while she travels is rare. She is getting antsy.

We realized that someone needed to be with her, watching her at all times. Recently she finally got so antsy and wandered out of the house. My aunty was at work and got a call from a random young lady, telling her that my grandma was standing in her driveway and wouldn't let her leave to go to work. The lady lived a two-hour drive away from my aunt's house, but offered to drive my grandma home anyway. My aunty was furious when she arrived home and called my mom and my uncles letting them know what happened and that she could not stay there anymore.

"What if we got a nurse to stay here?" My uncle suggested.

"Too expensive, we can't afford it." My mom replied.

"Nursing home?"

"She won't go."

"Tom, you try."

"Naomi, if you can't handle her then I definitely can't."

I'm not exactly sure who came up with the idea and my mom won't tell me who it was either. "I know it's cruel, but it's the only option we have," is what she said to console me. The family will tell my grandma that she is going on a trip. Finally! She will get on an

airplane and be free to wander. She will be going on a trip to Okinawa. What we won't tell her is that she's going to be staying there, without us.

...

Family in Hawaii is a force that cannot be reckoned with. When the power of an entire family comes down upon you it's as if the strength of a tsunami is on your back. It is honestly scary, but comforting at the very same time. I know that if anyone or anything were to ever harm me or come near to harming me, my family will be right there behind me. If a boy makes me cry, my cousins go and hunt him down. If a family member is sick, we stay by their side. At least, that's what I thought. As Lilo and Stitch said, "Ohana means family, family means nobody gets left behind, or forgotten." Are we going against everything that family stands for?

...

I guess we are kind of like a mafia now. We are organizing a crime except that it is against one of our own. Of course no one wants to be the one to have to do it. I thought I would be the last person to be a part of the whole operation after expressing my anger and guilt towards the decision. Then I received a call from my mom.

"Well, you'll get your dream of going to Okinawa."

"What? Why?" I asked, already guessing the answer.

"Your aunty is paying for my ticket and grandma's so we just have to pay for yours."

"I won't be there when you leave her at the nursing home."

"I know. I don't want you to see that."

I'm not sure what I feel guiltier for. The fact that I'm going to sit by and watch as my grandma is forced into a nursing home in a country that she hasn't been to in over twenty

years, or the fact that I don't even have the heart to watch and say goodbye to her there. We are family. We are supposed to be strong for one another. As long as this is the best decision then I will have to be strong for her or maybe she will have to be strong for me.

As a woman was driving home on the freeway, a police officer pulled her over. As he peered into the driver's side window he looked confused. "I pulled you over because I saw children unbuckled playing in your back seat. I was wrong, I'm sorry about that." The woman went home and her husband found her in tears. "Look at the back window." There were two pairs of tiny footprints and handprints. The couple had two stillborn children just months before.

Chapter 15:

Winter Candy Apple

Rushing out of the shower, I throw my towel on the ground and hurriedly swing open the door to my cabinet. Deodorant, lotion and perfume lay before me as I unconsciously layer them on my body. As I am walking out of the bathroom I stop in my tracks. Vanilla and apple scents trickle down my nostrils and grip my throat. I am immediately hurled back in time to Christmas a year ago.

As I hopped out of the shower, I threw on my favorite scent for the holiday season: winter candy apple. Reid's mom and I would coordinate scents that would go well together and she would always wear vanilla rum to go along with the apple notes in my perfume. Together, we smelled like a delicious holiday cocktail drink.

"Ash... could I talk to you?" Reid asked as I walked into the room.

"Sure." I was in a bit of a rush considering I had been up since six am with his grandma and mom learning the family Christmas dinner recipes. Tonight was the family

Christmas dinner and I was so nervous for everything to turn out right. I had spent Christmas here in Bismarck before, but this year seemed different. I was no longer just a guest but one of the ladies of the family and had to partake in all family tradition. Running off of adrenaline, I opened the closet doors and quickly dressed.

“Its about your condition.... Not being able to have kids.” My heart stops beating, but my body does not stop moving. I don’t want him to see my uneasiness.

“My family loves you and I’m sure that they’re expecting us to talk about marriage at dinner tonight but... I’m unsure about the idea.”

“We’re young, it’s natural. Let’s talk later.” I smear on my makeup and speak as calmly as possible.

“Ash. I can’t marry someone who can’t have my own child.”

I don’t even realize I’m smearing my mascara. The clock reads 8:05. I was supposed to leave five minutes ago. Grabbing my purse and my keys, I run out the door of my studio apartment. Living alone after the break up was one of the best things to happen to me. Peace of mind and not having to conform to anyone else’s lifestyle made things much easier to handle. “Hi Ash!” my two elderly neighbors from down the hall always greet me as I make my way down the elevator to my car in the mornings. They’re usually out on a walk to get coffee as I leave. Honestly, a great way to start my day. I do get lonely at times but reminders of how happy I will be keep me going.

When my cousin was young, she would wake up with bruises all over her body. They had no explanation for it. Finally, my aunt decided to stay up and watch her sleep to see if my cousin hurt herself in her sleep. What she saw scarred her for life. As Candace slept, a handprint began to form on her thigh right in front of my aunt's eyes. They took her to a priest who led her to be baptized and the bruises stopped.

Chapter 16:

Sugar Shack

Buzz.... Buzzzz...

There's no way my alarm is going off already, I thought as I reached over to grab my phone that harshly illuminated my pitch-black room. It was a phone call, from my boyfriend Reid. He had gone out with his friends downtown since it was a Friday night. Every weekend he and his friends would go out and get belligerently drunk and would call me to come and get him sometimes if things got out of hand. Tonight must have been one of those nights.

"Hello." I said into my phone, half-asleep.

"Come and get me, I don't want to be at home."

"Are you okay?"

"Taylor came over and she's annoying."

"You invited her over?" I tried to stay calm, but I could feel the anger building in my throat like a boulder gaining momentum.

"I don't know who did. Wasn't me. Come pick me up if you don't want me around her." Taylor had caused one too many problems throughout our relationship, but Reid

never had the heart, or so he said, to put a stop to the behavior. I sat back and watched, as the text messages would come in at two a.m. when she was drunk and lonely.

“She’s just trying to get to you.” He’d say. “She’s jealous that I wouldn’t consider dating her.” I tried to be understanding since he still considered her one of his friends, but every time her name would come up, I could not shake the sinking feeling in my gut. “Just a friend,” is a phrase that I’ve grown to hate. I cringe when I hear it. I would later find out that all of Reid’s “Just-a-friends” were not really just friends.

“Okay, I’m on my way.” I said as I hopped out of bed, threw on a t-shirt and yoga pants, and fumbled around to find my car keys. I switched on the light and my tired eyes flinched and retreated as I slipped into my shoes and headed out. The sun was far from rising and the night sky was still and empty when I walked outside. The glow of the streetlight illuminating the flies was the only thing hint that there was life at this time of night. I stepped in my car and turned on the air conditioning to relax and cool my body down from the tail end of summer’s heat. Reid only lived a short drive from my house, and before I knew it, I was pulling up to his parking lot. He was sitting on the trunk of his old and rusty Mitsubishi Eclipse, swinging his legs back and forth like a child with a giant goofy grin on his face as he saw my car. He hopped down and walked over to the passenger seat. As soon as he got in the car, his grin was from ear to ear, as he said a simple, “Hi!” and gave me a kiss on the cheek. As he leaned in, I could already smell the whiskey cokes that he had been downing all night.

“Hey. How was your night?” I said flatly, trying to control my mix of emotions.

“Super fun! You look upset. I hate when you’re like this! What’s wrong?”

“Just tired.”

He rolled his eyes and continued to drunkenly blabber on about his night out with his friends. When we got to my house, he followed me in and slammed the door shut.

“Reid! My roommates are sleeping!”

“Geez! Chill, I didn’t mean to!”

We made our way up the steep white stairs into my room. I lay down on the bed and tried to get comfortable enough to sleep as Reid took off his watch and sweaty clothes, then got into bed next to me. Immediately I could smell the mixture of alcohol, cigarettes, sweat and cheap women’s perfume. I knew that specific scent too. It was one that I had worn in middle school, when girls would buy those multi-packs of Victoria’s Secret body sprays and give one to each of their friends. I had millions of those colorful bottles that held the sickly sweet scents.

Reid reached across my body and pulled me in close to him. I could feel the stickiness of his dry sweat against my back as he kissed the back of my neck. His hands traced the side of my body as he started pushing himself up against me harder and harder.

“I’m tired.” I said as I brushed his hand off. This was far from true, I was sick to my stomach with the thought of what could have happened tonight and the stench of his night’s activities filling my room. He stopped, thankfully, and seemed to have fallen asleep for a second, when he started again. This time, I could tell, he was too drunk to realize what was going on. Too drunk to realize that he was in bed with me, his girlfriend.

“Why’d you leave me tonight?” He groaned flirtatiously.

“Reid, what are you talking about?”

“You said you were coming back to the bar, I waited.” His hands gripped aggressively at my side, as I lay there, speechless, unable to breathe.

“I was never at the bar...”

“Yeah you were with me! I missed you.”

“Reid do you know who you’re talking to?” His hands released me, and I felt his body tense up as he was jerked back to reality like being suddenly awoken from a dream.

“What the fuck are you saying?! Of course I know who I’m talking to.”

“Who left you at the bar?”

“No one! You’re so fucking annoying. I was just trying to sleep.”

“Who was she?” This was another phrase I was getting tired of. The words burned my tongue every time they left my mouth, and I could feel a piece of me vanish every time I said it.

“You’re ridiculous. I’m going home.”

“I drove you.”

“I’ll walk to the strip club down the road then. I don’t want to be around you.”

He got up and began putting his clothes and shoes back on, stomping on the ground, trying to keep his balance. I touched his arm and told him I’d drive him home; that it was too dangerous to walk on the highway at three in the morning.

“Don’t touch me!” He screamed at me.

“Reid, my roommates are...”

“I don’t give a fuck! I’m leaving.”

I didn’t know what to do, so I followed him outside like a lost puppy, begging him to let me drive him home. It was late, and he was drunk. I knew the dangers that lined the streets on the way to his house. There was no way I would have been able to sleep if I let him go.

His legs moved much faster than mine, considering he was six feet tall and I didn't even reach his shoulders. I had to jog to keep up, all while trying to get him to talk to me. Despite all the insults he threw at me as we walked further away from my house, I continued to follow. Before I knew it, we had reached the main road that was very dangerous to walk on at night. I reached for his arm, crying by now, begging him to turn around. In a second, I was flung to the ground, the left side of my body hitting the surprisingly cool concrete. Too stunned to say anything, I pushed myself up, dusting the gravel off of my hands and leg. I saw him standing there in disbelief of what he had just done.

"See! You should have just left me alone! That wouldn't have happened."

I stood there. Afraid. For the first time ever, I felt afraid of the boy I thought was the love of my life. I took one step back. Then another. I began walking away. I walked and walked until I reached my house. I climbed in bed. He didn't follow me.

I called his best friend and roommate Jed, to make sure he knew where Reid was.

"He was really drunk Ash, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

The lies came naturally after that night. I am fine. I am happy. Yes, he's a good guy. No, he would never do that to me. They came so naturally that for another year after that night, I began to believe them myself.

In Hawaii, Pele can take many different forms. She can be an old beggar or the most beautiful wahine you have ever seen. If you are kind to her and others, good fortune will befall you, and if you wrong her, she will wreak havoc on your life. But the main reason we call her the Mother of the Islands is because she is our protector.

Chapter 17:

Femme Fatale

You could almost feel the electricity in the air stemming from the students' excitement for the school year to end. Smiles painted the faces of friends and acquaintances as you walked out the glass doors of the library onto the campus green, sun beaming down as if summer were saying "hello". Plans for the night were made as everyone reluctantly parted ways even though we'd see each other in a mere few hours. I hurriedly walked to my tiny, black Honda civic, threw my bag in the back and blasted the air conditioning before peeling out of the Concordia parking lot.

The first thing I did when I got to my apartment was phone home. I had not seen my family since December and my stretches away from home began to get longer and longer. It was never easy saying goodbye after visiting, but the last time was especially tough. For the first time, I had no idea when I would be back. School, work and the stresses of entering my final year of college did not allow me the luxury of leaving for a vacation even to visit my family.

...

"You'll be fine. Just get your degree and make us proud."

My Aunty Naomi was always the backbone of the family. Although a five-foot-five stature does not seem so menacing, her stocky frame and wild pitch-black mane,

commanded your attention. She didn't walk with grace, it was more of a stomp, but when you heard her footsteps, you could already see her larger-than-life smile filling up the room. She would fully engulf me in her warm arms and it felt like home.

It was because of my Aunty with the help of my mom that my family was able to survive in the U.S after my grandpa was killed in the Vietnam War. Being the oldest sister, she assumed responsibility and raised my mom and my two uncles while my grandma struggled with a mental break. Working multiple jobs, raising children all while looking out for the wellbeing of my grandma was back-breaking work, but she worked her magic. Years later, we all look back at what she has done for my family and never cease to be amazed. In Japanese culture, the family dynamic is always patriarchal with the oldest male in the family being the leader or the one that everyone holds with the most respect, but that is not the case in our family. My Aunty is without a doubt the head of our clan and no one dares challenge her authority.

"Get good grades and stop giving your mom a hard time!" Was what she always told me before I left to go back to school, but this time it seemed different. There was a hint of reluctance and sadness in her tone.

"You know what you have to do. Always make your family proud no matter what." With tears welling up in my eyes, I turned to pick up my bags and make my way through airport security, stopping to give everyone a hug and kiss. I didn't want my family to see me cry, because I was already teased constantly for being the overly sensitive or overly emotional one in the bunch, so I quickly waved and dashed through security. My week at home was spent with my family hiking, visiting my grandpa's memorial, and having family dinners. Even though I had not been there for the past year, I did not feel like an outsider

one bit. They quickly filled me in on all the happenings of the year; my cousin's new boyfriends, how silly my mom was and how my grandma was doing. Of course my Aunty Naomi was the one filling me in on everything and I laughed as her boisterous voice echoed all the way across the table to me. After all the fun and relaxation, it was time to go back to reality. The week had come and gone in the blink of an eye.

What I wasn't expecting was that the next few months would fly by just as fast. One day I'm walking off the plane in Portland and the next, I'm walking out of my last final of the school year. It shocked me to think how fast time was passing and it made me more confident in my decision to remain in Portland and not return home. I parked my car and made my way up to my apartment, so eager to hear my mom's voice and let her know that I had made it through another year of school alive.

...

I walked into my stuffy apartment; the new summer heat already infiltrating the walls, seeping in. The blinds were shut and the room grew dim as my door shut behind me. Wading my way through the mess on the floor, I found a spot at the foot of my bed, sat down and called home.

"I'M DONE!!!!!!!!!" I screamed into the phone before she could even finish saying hello.

"Congrats! How were finals? Did you say bye to your friends? How are you feeling?"

I let her know every single detail and we talked for a while, then suddenly her tone changed abruptly.

"Mitsue, I need to tell you something, but you have to promise you won't worry and you'll continue doing what you're doing."

I waited for her to start, my heart already racing along with the millions of thoughts running through my head. *Did something happen to my cousin? Oh no, it's grandma isn't it...*

"Well, Obachan (grandma) finally went to a nursing home and isn't living with Aunty Naomi anymore."

"That's good! She went of her own free will? How long has it been?"

"It's been a while now, we just didn't want to bother you with it while you were at school."

"Why would I worry about that? That's a relief."

"It was because Aunty Naomi couldn't take care of her anymore."

"Well yeah, Obachan's crazy, neither could you."

"Don't be angry with me, but I understand if you are. We just couldn't tell you. Your Aunty made all of us promise to wait 'til you were done with school."

I had no idea what could possibly be wrong. *What secret would they want to keep from me?*

"Um, what's going on?"

"Aunty Naomi has cancer, and it's spreading, but she's undergoing treatment. She's being so tough."

I tried to say something, but no words came out. The blood rushed to my head in a wave of confused anger, making me lightheaded. My lips went numb, rendering me unable to speak. I had nothing to say. I wasn't upset. I didn't know what I was.

"I just need some time. I'll call soon."

"You should call your Aunty and tell her you know now. Love you Mitsue."

“Love you too.” *Click.* I hung up the phone and maneuvered my body onto my bed. I’m not sure how long I had laid there until the tears started pouring out. I felt weak and cowardly. My own family hid this secret from me because they knew I wouldn’t be able to handle it, and truth be told, I couldn’t handle it. I called my mom every day asking for updates because I was too afraid to talk to my Aunty herself.

...

“Your Aunty just finished another round of chemo today. She’s just feeling kind of sick but she’s staying positive.”

“When will we know if it’s in remission?”

“We won’t know ‘til December unfortunately.”

“I want to come home.”

“You can’t. You need to work and finish school.”

“Just for a week. Please!”

“I’ll send more pictures and we’ll keep you updated Mitsue.”

The weeks passed and every time I had talked to my mom, it was the same thing: more chemo, more radiation, still sick. From what my mom and cousins were telling me, my Aunty had been staying positive and was at peace with whatever her future held. Hard-headedness is a trait that all the women in our family seem to possess and for once, that one trait was what held my family together. If it weren’t for my Aunty being able to tackle the cancer head on and with a fiery fight, we would probably all fall apart and be lost without her direction.

It was about two months since I found out when I woke up from a much-needed nap to a text from my mom.

“Do you want to see a picture? We went out to lunch today.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting to see, but my stomach turned and I felt a wave of nausea wash over me as I looked at the ghost of a woman I once knew. Her shaved head was hidden with a tattered old sunhat, her shirt hanging off of her bony shoulders, and a smile that was not reflected in her hollow eyes. This was a lie. This was not my Aunty. This was not the woman who raised our entire family, not the woman who was feared and respected, this was not the woman I said goodbye to only six months ago. I didn’t have it in me to say anything after seeing the picture. I just left it alone and pretended I didn’t see it.

After a few days my mom called me to check in since I had not communicated with anyone in the family since she sent that picture. The conversation started off light, with the normal pleasantries, but as always, my mom had something to tell me.

“You need to call your Aunty.”

“I will. I’m just busy. She knows I’m praying for her.”

“I know you’re afraid, and I know you’re worried, but avoiding her isn’t going to make this go away.”

“Mom, I will.”

“I know she really wants to hear from you.”

“I know. Tell her I’m sorry.”

She was right, but every time I tried to send a text or email, I couldn’t bring myself to hit send. I still had not yet learned to grow a backbone even after everything. There were just no words that would explain to her how I felt. I still can’t put it in words and I don’t know if I ever will be able to.

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