

Sanctuaries

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IT'S BEEN TEN WEEKS since Liz (my mother) came to collect me from the islands and pack me back to Michigan. She wanted me to tally my losses and get on with things.

Liz has always been one for getting on with things. She long ago learned to get along without my dad, who failed to survive bypass surgery. I haven't quite forgiven her for never letting me see his body and say good-bye. She thought she was protecting me, figured she could manage my grief without my particular input.

In her mind, she can manage anything. She has every remedy. Some remedies come from Gospel Doctrine class. Others come from avoidance. The rest are from Aloe Vera. Liz is on the pyramid point of the Forever Living Aloe Vera Sales System. As far as she's concerned, there's nothing she can't control, clean up, cure, or deny. A scripture or two, a little cactus juice, and voila! Take up your bed and walk.

But no one's packed up. Not yet. It's winter in Michigan, and Liz has decided she'll wait it out. She'll do a little whale watching, and she'll flirt. I had not known her to flirt before, but Hawaii brings out strange things in people. So we've become The Jogging Widows of Hukilau Beach. While the rising sun bleeds gold onto the ocean, we jog barefoot. We are long, lean, and freckled. Our hair is bleached and cropped. I'm tanned. Liz is most definitely not. She wears 40-spf Aloe Vera lotion even at sunrise.

Her last words to me before I flew to Hawaii were, "You're not going to solve anything by sunning yourself into cancer, you know." That was as intimate and loving as anything she had ever said. "Like the Lord tells us," she went on, "don't trust your own understanding. A man who hires himself as a lawyer has a fool for a client."

"The Lord didn't say that. Some ambulance chasing lawyer said that."

"The Lord said the first part. Anyway, truth is truth, so where's the conflict?"

The look on Liz's face when she quotes scriptures, clichés, or Forever

Living sales scripts fascinates me. She keeps herself detached, and it shows in her eyes. My guess is, she doesn't want to feel guilty about using words or people for her own ends. She doesn't want to feel guilty about her footprints on anyone's shoulders in the Aloe Vera pyramid. But don't let her fool you. She once paid extra tithing so our bishop would ask where she was getting all her money and she could unfold the Cactus Plan to him.

I left the pointy parts of church when I left Michigan. No more steeples for me. No more pyramids.

"Too much sun is guaranteed to turn you into a prune," she said the night before I flew away. "At least take some Formula with you."

My response was that I liked prunes. In the morning, I cabbled to the airport and sent myself to Oahu. I chose the Mormon town of Laie, which I had visited as a child. I still remembered holding my dad's hand outside the temple. Laie felt comfortable. If you're not quite Mormon anymore, but not unMormon either, and if you have sweet memories to relive, Laie is cozy. I didn't even know it was an ancient refuge, the destiny of Hawaiian prisoners trying to outrun death. If they could get to Laie, they'd be safe. When I found out, I knew I'd made the perfect move.

The Laie temple is the prettiest I've seen, but I didn't get married there. I married Marv on Hukilau Beach and didn't invite Liz. I didn't even tell her about it until it was old news, until my beautiful, azure-eyed husband was terminal.

Liz never met him. The week of his funeral, she claimed she had a Forever Living seminar which she "absolutely couldn't miss." She never saw Marv's body. That was her choice, not mine. Three weeks later she arrived, greeting me at the airport with, "You've lost weight."

Those words held a huge congratulation. To Liz, the Big Four are: Make money, keep thin, clean the house, go to church.

Until Marv, I had always been chubby. From my middle school days, Liz told me that if I didn't drink "Product" every morning, I would never lose an ounce and would be lucky to attract a maggot.

"Yeah, Liz. I have lost a little," I said. Right there was the transition. She wasn't "Mom" anymore. She was Liz.

She didn't balk. On our way outside, I gave her the skeleton details of my seaside wedding, of Marv's death and funeral, and she glanced away.

"So you're a widow. I know how that is," she said into the breeze. "You need family support, Tanya. Why don't you come home?" She didn't look me in the eyes. She rarely did.

I was picturing Liz's version of family support: everyone crowded into a thorny triangle in front of the Salt Lake temple, holding onto each other's pockets for dear life.

"Marv's family is real supportive," I said.

"But it's not a blood tie."

"Just a different kind," I said—meaning thornless. No blood at all.

"So. You've hardly filled me in on a thing. Let's start with the happy parts. How'd you meet him?"

I didn't tell her. Not about the night I closed up the print shop and Marv aimed himself at the glass door, hand outstretched, mouthing, "Let me in." Not how I shouted, "We're closed—read the sign!" and he shouted back, "Break the rules, I need you!" Not about our first argument (over my artist's fee for the magazine cover his students were designing). Not about our negotiations: he'd pay full price if I'd go with him on a midnight dive where hammerheads fed. Not about the cabin.

"Business," I said as I started the car. "I met him through business. He was a customer."

No more questions from Liz. "Business" explained it all.

In Laie, I introduced her to my in-laws. That's when I caught her flirting. She was shameless with Marv's much older, much divorced brother, Policeman Jack. Liz sucked in her cheeks, the way she does when she smells money. He asked her out to a movie, and she borrowed my make-up. When we took to beach jogging a week later, she assumed my paisley one-piece. I wore white shorts and a thick t-shirt, no bra.

Hukilau Beach surrounds a coral reef. The surf is never fierce, though in the distance you can see rougher waters, furious waves shouldering into Goat Island like a punishment, like they're trying to undo it. The waves explode, shoot themselves up into mad geysers. We could see them as we jogged. There are sharks out there too—big ones, tigers. A too-brave kid once surfed beyond the reef and saw a black form move under his board. He turned to look. When he faced forward again, the shark's head was out of the water, waiting, jaws open in a jagged yawn. The kid's feet were mangled, but he made it to shore.

I told Liz about that, and she answered exactly as I knew she would: "Forever Living has this vitamin E gel. That kid should know about it. It absolutely erases scars. Absolutely. You remember the little scar I had under my right eye? It's gone."

I said, "No, it's not." I didn't look.

"Nearly," she said.

In later days, we found Japanese floats—blue glass balls like Christmas ornaments—which had escaped the fishing nets they were intended to weigh down. I always figured we'd find something amazing someday. Hadn't figured it'd be a corpse.

I had been a widow two months to the day when we found the body. Liz had been a widow for a decade.

I was focused on a memory and not expecting corpses on my path. Never had.

My memory was of the cabin, just beyond the cove of palms and pines. Marv leads me to it. He says, "Let's go inside—want to?"

I laugh. "I'm sure it's locked."

But he turns the knob easily. Inside, a card table is set with gold-rimmed china. A red candle sits in a bed of moss and eucalyptus. Steam rises from white rice and baked swordfish. It's a feast.

"Marv! We can't!" I use my giggly voice. It's a version of my mother's from decades ago when she was the age I am now.

He pulls me by the wrists. "We can do anything." He kicks the door shut. "Anything." He kisses my neck, moves me towards the bed.

"Did you arrange this?" I kiss his chin.

His answer is to lift off my shirt. "Why do you care?"

"I just want to know how quick we need to be. Someone's expecting to eat pretty soon."

"That would be me. We can do anything. We can take as much time as we want."

And we do. The feast is for us. For me.

Two months later, he notices that he's blind in his left eye. The tumor is diagnosed soon afterwards. I begin learning new words, starting with "Retinal Blastoma."

My memory loves to inhabit the cabin. It was fully inside when Liz saw the corpse.

Of course, she had to see it first. Liz was always watching for dorsal fins in the water and rapists in the woods. She half expected dead bodies to fall on her trail.

"What on earth?" she said.

Then I saw.

The body was grotesquely turned, one arm stretched across the back, the head tilted sideways, open-mouthed, open-eyed. Sea salt had dried in pale stripes on the cheeks, crusted on the brows. The body was naked. Samoan. I recognized him as one of Marv's students, Mikele. Big shoulders, thick, coarse hair, no marks on his body to accuse sharks or gangs.

We stared for a moment before Liz whispered, "Do you know him?"

"Yeah." Marv had worried over him, had actually said, "That guy will get himself killed one of these days."

"Seventeen? Eighteen years old?" Liz whispered.

"Around that."

"It's pretty recent." She knelt beside him. "No rigor mortis." She raked her fingers through her fresh-cut, fresh-bleached hair.

I knelt, too. "Marv knew him pretty well."

"Someone's heart will break today."

"I know."

She shook her head. "I'm glad I don't have to break people's hearts. Wouldn't you hate a job that made you break people's hearts?"

"Like God's job, you mean?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't blaspheme."

I take in a long breath. "I'd rather sell aloe vera."

"Don't knock Aloe Vera. I've seen miracles like from the Bible with Forever Living. I've told you."

"Don't blaspheme, Liz. And this is not the time to sell me Product."

"You can be so sassy. Even at a place like this, with someone dead at our knees. Why are you like that? Where did that come from?"

"Too much TV?"

"You're blaming me for not reading you *Curious George* every day. Aren't you?"

"Liz, you're not responsible for the world's woes."

"You had everything you wanted."

"Everything cactus juice could buy."

"You're blaming Product for your mouth?"

"We owe this kid some respect, okay?"

"I should say we do. No more sassing. One of us should go for—what? An ambulance? A bishop? Was he LDS?"

"Most everyone in Laie is."

A wave rolled in, pushing foam to the body's waist.

"Bishops break hearts too. When your dad died, Bishop Olson broke the news. Not a doctor, not a cop. I had fallen asleep. Bishop woke me up to tell me. Do you remember Bishop Olson?"

"Sure."

Her eyes teared, which came as a surprise. For the briefest moment, she appeared almost vulnerable. Then she looked straight at me, eye to eye. "I'm sorry," she said. "I am truly sorry."

I let her words hover, not sure if she was quoting what the bishop had said or if she was apologizing to me. I finally managed, "Bishop Olson seemed like a nice fellow."

"Absolutely."

"Did he ever agree to sell product?"

"No."

"What? Never converted? Not even after you paid all that extra tithing?"

"I wasn't being deceitful. Giving someone a chance to get health and wealth is not being deceitful."

Another wave, and the ocean sucked itself back in. Sand shifted under our knees. "Do you believe in God?" I asked vaguely.

"Yes." She gazed at the sea. "Of course I do. Without God, we're miserable creatures. You know what the scriptures say."

"I think I do. That's gotta help."

"I should say so."

"Do you believe in God as much as you believe in Aloe Vera?"

She shrugged slowly. "God made Aloe Vera, so where's the conflict?"
"But God didn't sell it."

"He provided it. Honey, it's not a bad plan. You've always judged it too harshly. That plan would've bought your prom dress if you had gone to prom."

"If I'd been thin enough to go to prom. You always judged me too harshly."

"You were a beautiful girl, just heavy around the hips. Not much on top, but heavy around the hips. Formula could've helped, and I didn't keep it a secret. Don't blame me."

"I don't blame you. For anything."

Another wave frothed its last hurrah over the body.

"Well, I don't blame you either," Liz said.

"Did you really have a meeting? When Marv died, did you really have something that important?"

She sent her eyes over the corpse. "Sometimes it's hard to understand why we do certain things. It's hard to know what's most important."

"If I'd married him in the temple—"

"I should go find a policeman."

I knew what she wanted. Policeman Jack.

"Okay," I said. "You get him, Liz. Go for it."

She stood, dusting her knees. "A wave could take that boy back if we left him."

"Don't worry, he's not going to disappear. And his name's Mikele."

"Are you all right with staying?" She was poking into her swimsuit top for lipstick. That's where she kept it. Forever Living in shrimp pink.

"You got some on your teeth," I said after she applied the stuff. "You know where the station is, right? You won't get lost?"

She licked her teeth. "Did I get it off?"

"You look lovely, Liz. Slim and trim and lovely."

"I'm glowing." She swept the droplets from her forehead and temples. Her freckles stood out like splotches of nutmeg. She was what I would be in twenty years, and it wasn't a bad future.

"You look really good," I said.

"This is terrible, what's happened here. Some mother's going to weep like the wind tonight. How silly to worry about my looks! I am not that shallow."

"You look pretty."

"Thanks." She jogged towards the street, towards Policeman Jack.

The waves were moving foam up the boy's midback, where it settled. The way his body was twisted, his penis was just visible between his legs. One leg was bent backwards under the other, so the penis touched the beach sand. I knew he would want to be covered. If he were my son, I'd want his body laid out better. The ocean had sprawled him into a mass of confused joints, unmuscled twists.

"I'm going to straighten you out," I said aloud. Bishop Olson—the guy who broke my mother's heart—once told me a spirit sticks with its body until burial time. "Help me if you can—God? Angels? You're heavy. Your body is." Moving the trapped arm from behind, I pushed him onto his back, uncrossed his legs, set them straight. His penis lay towards his right thigh. I found a sea-mangled bit of black plastic a few feet away, brushed off the sand, and set it over his groin. "Best I can do just now." Aloud again. I took his head in my hands, then set it gently down, held my fingers on his lids. The eyes wouldn't stay closed, nor would the mouth.

Some parts of him were sand crusted. I removed my shirt so I could wipe him off. The waves were receding, foaming only partway up his legs. After each wave pulled back, I spread the moisture onto his skin. I wet my shirt in the sea and washed him—every bit of him. "If you were my son," I said, "I'd want someone to wash this off." I covered his face with my shirt so the sun wouldn't dry his eyes or tongue. I shielded my naked breasts with one arm. When I licked my lips, I tasted salt.

"I'm trying to decide what I love best about you." Marv is talking. He's sitting up. We have spent ourselves on and in each other, bedded in some stranger's bed, and he's fingering my pre-bleach hair. "Copper head."

"Isn't that a snake?"

"That's my wife. Copper hair-head."

"Did you just call me an airhead?"

"Never. Amethyst eyes. Peach fuzz skin."

"Peach fuzz. Some romantic you are."

"Why do you love me?" He whispers it.

"Hair like wet tar." I stroke it.

"Geez."

"Eyes like a smashed robin's egg."

"Thanks. Wow."

"Mouth." I kiss it.

I had never let myself get close to another person until him. Never let a man into me, body and soul. I had grown up with a keen sense of borders, compartments, triangles, self-loathing. I abandoned them all for Marv. Married him four weeks after he asked me to break the rules, to let him in. And I did and I did and I did. We planned on going to the temple eventually. When we were ready. Which we never were.

Within three months of our wedding, masked doctors would shave his head to prepare him for surgery—which would fail to save him. Both his eyes would go blind. I would still kiss his mouth, and he would be able to kiss me back—until the last week.

I wouldn't tell Liz about that either. All of my Hawaiian scenes I lived away from her.

"You're on Hukilau Beach," I said to Mikele. "Your body is. The sun's up—barely. Were you trying to get to Goat Island? People try to

walk the coral out. There's a point where the waves hit you from both sides. You can lose your sense of direction. Especially if you're alone. Were you drunk?" I dropped my arm. My breasts were white compared to the rest of me, like they didn't belong, like they should be in Michigan. "Doesn't matter, does it. Marv and I went to Goat Island every now and then. It's a bird sanctuary. Not for goats. You must know that. A sanctuary for almost extinct species. Most of it's roped off so humans don't intrude. You can see the nests. It's trespassing to step over the rope, so you have to be sure no one's looking. One time, Marv found a baby ibis."

The first time Marv leads me to Goat Island, it's nearing dusk. The sun's a brilliant peach behind us. I don't know about the coral wall—walkable in low tide—so Marv dupes me easy.

"At the Missionary Training Center," he says, "they taught us to walk on water."

"Right."

"Watch me." Then he stands on the quiet ocean and starts walking. His steps are even, graceful, feet barely submerged, arms raised slightly. He is an almost *Cristus*, floating himself out to sea.

"Good Lord," I breathe, "you were serious!"

His whole face breaks into smile lines. "There's a coral reef here. Be sure your sandals are on tight. Them congregated critters make rough walkin'."

"A coral reef?"

"This here's the Affiliated Titillated Coral Critters Society, yes ma'am."

"Geez, how do you titillate coral?"

"Easy. So easy. Follow me."

I walk over those rocky animals who have died in each other's pockets, until opposing waves confuse me and I have to swim.

Marv climbs onto the island—a hill of white-grey coral like cement with a bad complexion. There's a rope around the entire thing. The island is the size of two baseball diamonds.

He helps me up, then scissors himself over the rope. I stand next to it, looking beachward for any guardian police who would no doubt arrest us quick and make us pose as felons. I see no one, but can't relax. Maybe Policeman Jack is watching, clicking the shutter of a telephoto camera, building evidence. Maybe that's what the cabin is—the hidden lookout where authority figures observe criminal motion on Goat Island.

"The sign says don't climb over," I announce.

"I don't believe in signs."

"What if I believe?"

"Ah, my dear, remember what the Bible says: 'A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.'" Marv was once a Mormon missionary. Celibacy, however, was a problem. He has a good relationship with God even without a temple recommend, though. He teaches holy son-

nets and D.H. Lawrence at Kahuku High—his own alma mater. And he knows the Bible and Book of Mormon better than Liz ever did. When he quotes the holy writ, it seems he'll rupture the air.

"They're pretty signs," I say. I'm a graphic artist, so I know how much work has gone into them. The bird images (stiff but not bad) are done in blue foil, "NO TRESPASSING" in block style, black. No mistaking the message here. Underneath, in navy ink, the cursive plea: "This is our sanctuary. Please let us make our nests in peace. It is easy to crush our eggs, and we're nearly extinct as it is. Please do not come past the rope."

These are damn polite birds. Damn friendly islands.

Marv says, "That's the biggest problem with graphic artists. They're sign-seekers."

"Depends on the pay."

"You and the money thing," he says.

"You and the felony thing." The ocean is wild just beyond the island. I shout above the hiss and crack of unreefed waves slapping rock-spears on the far side.

"You know what I want," he says.

"Don't even ask me to make love with you behind that rope, Marv. I have my limits."

"I love your limits. Makes it so fun to go beyond them." His grin. "Oh, look at this bird," he sighs. It's a ball of grey down. Marv's hands cup it. The down shudders, but the baby allows itself to be cradled.

"Don't even ask," I say.

"You've got to hold this bird, Tan. You have got to feel how this feels!" His voice goes low, but I can hear him.

"I said I'm not going there with you."

"You'll live to regret that. You may not get another chance."

"I'll live."

"You can never be sure."

"And I'll come visit you in prison. At least once a year. I'll bring you a lei."

He lifts his brows. "Yeah?"

"L-e-i. Lei."

He sets the bird next to its nest. "Take off your clothes." This he whispers, but I can hear him fine. His voice is being carried to me.

I laugh.

"There's no one here but you and me and these birds. Off."

"Marv, I told you—"

"Please. I can't tell you what it'd mean."

So I do. Just for him.

"Now turn so you're in profile." He sighs prayerfully as I turn. "You make the most magnificent eclipse. Look at you! All your arm hairs and

leg hairs—oh, and that hair too—all shining! Lord. There's such light between your legs. I'm telling you—you were made for this moment."

I lift my hands so I can see it myself: Yes, I have been glorified. I had never believed I could be beautiful.

"Please," Marv says. "Let me love you."

"No. Not here."

"I'm begging you on my knees."

"It's getting dark. I don't want to be here after dark."

"Don't be afraid. Perfect love casts out fear."

"No. I mean it."

"Then stay there—for one minute. Just stay. Let me look at you."

I meet his gaze. I am being worshipped.

A sea breeze lifted the plastic from the boy's groin, I covered him again, then found some shells and coral bits to weight the plastic. Still no sign of Liz or Policeman Jack.

"My husband was the unruly sort," I told dead Mikele. "You knew him, right? Always heading into places he wasn't supposed to."

The remnant of an enthusiastic wave foamed over the body, washed the plastic off, moved my shirt from the face, and bubbled between the ribs. I grabbed my shirt, wet it, washed the body again. Once more I covered the face and groin, once more I weighted the plastic with white shells and detached coral.

"I'm not a real strong woman. Good thigh muscles from all the jogging, but not much in the way of biceps. If I had biceps, I'd move you back from the waves."

Marv and I go to the stranger's place again, Marv hoping the romance of it all will lure a good erection, make him feel better. We both know something's wrong, but we haven't talked about it yet.

Nothing works.

"Is it me?" I ask.

"No."

"Am I too fat?"

"Someone's got to burn those tapes."

"Do I smell bad or something?"

"Honey, you're not responsible for the world's woes. No, no. You smell like—you. Sometimes I just think about you and get hard. What's up here? Nothing's up here."

"You haven't been eating much. Maybe you've lost some strength?"

"I have no appetite. Not for food, anyway. I've always had an appetite for you." He takes his flaccid self between his thumb and middle finger. "Just what do you think you're not doing?" he says to it.

"Marv? Are you sick?"

He blinks. "Why?"

"You look pale. I thought you looked pale yesterday. Thought I'd make you a good plate of liver and onions."

"Thanks. Wow. That'd cure me for sure. Just like raw liver." He fingers himself again.

"I can stroke you."

"I don't want to play games." There's an edge to his voice.

"Come on, you're always playing games."

He drops his head. "I've been throwing up every day."

"You stupidhead!" I slug his arm. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Thought you'd slug my arm if I did. Thought you'd call me stupidhead. Can't stand it when you call me stupidhead."

"Sticks and stones?" I open my arms and we try again.

Nothing.

When he turns away, I press my breasts into his back. That's the moment I sense he's leaving me behind, heading to paradise without me. I'll be a witness, nothing more. He—my intimate interlude—will become a set of photos, dimming memories primed to hit me in odd moments like some transparent wave.

I hear him whisper—or think I do, or dream it: "God. Please. Let me love her."

"If you were my son, I'd want you cleaned up," I told Mikele's body.

The incoming wave was carrying a Japanese float, bigger than what Liz and I usually found. Big as a softball. I identified it before it hit land, though it was covered with barnacles and sea moss. It would need to be scrubbed, then it'd glisten. A gift from the Pacific, carried all the way from Japan. Someone I'd never see had made a glass globe, and now I'd claim it for my collection. The wave pushed it almost to my hand, and I accepted. The float was blue-green under the dross, like a crystalized piece of ocean. Someone else's work, someone else's memory, but you could touch it, feel it, claim it.

My father, when he died, left only a closet full of old suits. Liz put them on consignment at a generic men's clothing store. I went there once to see if I could smell him in the fibers. I couldn't even tell which suits were his. Everything reeked of dry-cleaning. I told this to Marv just before we swam with the hammerheads. I said, "My father left a closet full of suits when he died."

"And he left you," Marv answered.

"Very inconsiderate of him to not survive that bypass."

"You." Marv made the word a miracle. "He left YOU."

My last conversation with my husband was this:

"Did God tell you it's your time, Marv?" (Did Liz ask my dad that before he went? I can't imagine it. I'm guessing it was more like insurance claims, low fat yogurt, Aloe Vera, the fence in need of painting.)

Marv moves his eyebrows to mean "Yes." He can't speak.

I don't ask if he feels he's being punished. I have wondered, but right now I know the answer. He is loved. I feel it so strong in the room and wonder who's waiting for him where I can't see. I sit by him while he

dies, holding his hand, knowing in my whole soul that he will find a magnificent welcome.

I won't tell Liz about this sacred moment. It is safe with me.

Above Goat Island, a heron circled like a predator. Guarding its young, no doubt. Or just checking out the security of the sanctuary. Never landing. Its wings went bright when the sun caught them.

I said to Mikele, "They do funerals up beautifully here. Marv, when he passed, he had whole wreaths of bleeding hearts. Did you come to his funeral? I don't remember you. A big Tongan sang 'Aloha Oe.' I remember purple orchids and white ginger. You'll have those too. And there will be a feast in your honor—even if you did die drunk. No one will be mad at you anymore, ever again. There will be a feast like a great celebration. No pity in it, no tears. A feast for sinners and mourners. Like nothing you've ever seen or tasted. You turn the doorknob. You think it will be locked, but it isn't. The door opens, and there's the feast, all for you. Biggest surprise of your life. It's your moment. You can't hurry, and you can't cry because there's too much love around you. Everything you touch is love, and everything you eat. It's like you're being worshiped. And all you can say is thank you. Thank you for loving me. Merciful God, thank you."

The sea breeze moved the plastic off the body despite the shells and coral I had used as weights. I chased it down.

"If you were my son," I said to Mikele, covering him again and securing the plastic with bigger pieces of coral, "I'd want you guarded."

"There they are!" That was Liz's voice.

And there they were. Liz and Policeman Jack. Big, brawny Policeman Jack. He was Marv plus thirty pounds and a mustache. Liz was getting to know her son-in-law through his brother. Trying to make up for distance, lost time, lost love. Jack's hand on her shoulder sent me a quick *deja vu*. (Whose hand was I remembering? Dad's or Marv's?) Liz was trying to look serious, but she was beaming, in love with adventure and youth, pointing at me and Mikele with her whole hand, not just a finger. An invitation. An accusation. A mirror. A vision of the past. A glimpse into the could-have-been future. Behind them was the fully-dawned sun like a brilliant whale—the god of whales—making them glorious and gold.

And there I was, topless as the day I was born. Naked before my gilded mother and Policeman Jack. I reached for my shirt, then pulled back. It didn't feel right to take what I had offered this boy for his protection.

"If you were mine. . ." I said, then covered my white, white breasts with one arm—my hand still holding the float—and with the other started waving like a one-winged bird, sweeping semicircles in the air.