

## A TANGLED TREE

### 1.

I am covered in honey, five years old, melting into a nylon tent and tripping on mushrooms. Acutely aware of my body, of sunburned arms and legs, of a beating heart and breathing lungs, I realize that something is whispering within me—something that I do not control. Blood, breath, bone, the self-activated motion of my pudgy vessel. Can it be, I ask, that I will always be trapped within this container? I lift a limb and examine the lines running across my palm. I bend and flex my wrist slowly, curiously. I try to sit up, but my head is heavy.

The door to the tent is open and looks out over a vast sandy shore, Kauai's Secret Beach. A breeze pushes in, cooling my naked body. I am covered in sticky syrup, glued to the tent floor. Waves crash against the shore, their rhythm a deep breathing. The jar of honey that my father's friend so carefully filled with black caps and stems—psilocybin mushrooms that grow wild on this island—is empty beside me. What I didn't eat, I used as paint and, with my fingers, drew a phantasm of butterflies and unicorns, mountains and mermaids. The walls of our tent, my own body, my canvas. I finger painted until I could no longer stand.

My artwork glistening around me, my hair matted with sugar, I trace a constellation of moles and marks that decorate my arm. There is weight against my brain, an atmospheric pressure, as dense as diving into water. In the heat of Kauai's midday sun, I go down, surrender to the mushroom trip and give myself up to questions I will never be able to answer.

My father finds me this way, swimming in a mess of stems and black-laced honey. "Oh, Aiyanna-lah," he says, taking in the scene, the overturned jar, the gooey chaos smearing the tent walls, and he laughs out loud. "So you found his stash?" he says, picking me up, covering me in a thin blanket, holding me tight. In his arms, the heaviness of my thoughts melts away, and I lean in, relieved.

He carries me to a freshwater stream that runs into the sea. In a sandy-bottomed shallow pool, he bathes me, washes black honey from my skin and hair. Clean and bundled, I am carried to the ocean's edge where we look out across the Pacific. He holds me close, feeds me water, tells me my soul is growing stronger. He softly sings a *nigun*, a Jewish song without words: "Ai, Yai, Yai, Yai, Yai..." The vocal chorus sounds like my name, and, comforted, I close my eyes. He begins to call me back from the unreality I unknowingly stumbled into. No stranger to these depths, his soothing voice maps the way back.

In his arms, I feel myself returning, though my body aches and forehead throbs.

He holds me until the sun sets. Until the sky is painted pink, yellow and orange, a collage of clouds mirrored by an expanse of water. We are alone on Kauai's last remaining nude beach.

"All is well, my sugar, my sweet honey," my father says into my ear. "You are free! And your Big Dada is right here, not going anywhere."

I say nothing, have no voice, and feel limp in his arms. I want to grow wings and fly through the pink sky.

Listening to the sound of his breathing, I snuggle into his chest. The day is pulled into night, and I am rocked in my father's hold, soothed with each inhale and exhale, lulled by the constant murmur of the sea.

## 2.

“I asked you to write *my* life story, *mine*. That’s all I asked you to do.”

I turn away, looking out onto a crystal-blue sea. Monsoon clouds swell on the horizon—dark thunderheads gathering close.

“Look here,” he says, pointing to a sentence. He reads it out loud: “*My father is a runner*, that’s what you wrote; those are your words, not mine. I didn’t ask for your judgments on me. I didn’t ask for your opinions.”

Though I’m prickling with anxiety, my words are steady: “How can I separate myself from this story, Dad? I’m part of it.”

“I am no *runner*.” His Eastern European accent makes each word heavy. They fall, leaden from his lips. “Aiyanna, you’ve painted me as a monster, as a *maniac*, who abandoned his children.” Moshe’s eyes dart back and forth, wild, green and uneasy. “As for my past and my mentors, I must admit that you’ve done well.” One hand rests on papers, palm covering a page; the other is pressed against his heart. “It moves me,” he says. “However, when it comes to my wives, my children and *me*—your perspective is totally false. The way you see me, the way you *write* about me, I’m nothing but a demon.” My father looks at me, thick creases of sorrow framing his features. “I will not put my name on it. No. *Never*. Not unless it’s totally changed.”

His words roll over me as I stare, watching a wall of rain push closer. I turn to my father. “This book is about both of us. It’s about the process that brought us close again. Dad, I’m the author. I have an equal stake in this. What would you have me do, throw myself out and start again?”

“I want two books,” he snarls. “Separate books. One about my childhood as a Holocaust survivor, my loving parents, and our journey from Poland to Israel.” He pauses, scowls, and continues, “Book one will be about my mentors, PhD, professorship at Harvard, and my accomplishments as a psychotherapist. Are you listening to me?”

My eyes are focused on limestone islands off the shore, slowly being swallowed by gray. A sharp wind rushes toward us. My father takes a drag; the end of his cigarette burns hot beside me.

“In the second book, you can write about the mothers who stole my children. I don’t want them anywhere near my parents’ story; they are not *worthy* of it.” He looks at me, eyes ablaze. “There, Aiyanna, you can judge me all you like. You can rip me apart.” He takes a deep breath. “As a father, I’m done. Do you hear me? I’m *retiring*. I release you to your life.”

I collect my book’s pages from my father’s hold. My words stare back at me, an unblinking pattern of black against white, and my heart beats hot and panicked. Have I betrayed him? My father’s words are shards of broken shells, angrily aimed and piercing. To him, in turn, my written words are sharp as blades, bearing down with vengeance and judgment. There is a fast-blustering wind around us and a torrent of rain only moments away.

Smoke swirls from my father’s mouth. “I am disappointed in you. I asked you to write my life story. That’s all I asked you to do.”

I see his anger, I see his agony, and I hold my words tight. The storm is coming. The storm is here.

## 3.

When I think of home, I see lush, green mountains with sharp peaks; I smell jasmine and sulfur, the bittersweet of burning sugarcane draped on the wind. Home tastes like the sea, like salty fish and volcanic clay; it sounds like the call of mocking mynah birds who fill the dawn with song.

Growing up on Kauai, I am raised by my mother, Schinah Jane, and Kalehua, her best friend from college. The three of us live together in a simple two-story house at the base of Sleeping Giant, a mountain range named after the legend of a half-fish, half-man, who, once pulled from the depths of the ocean, ate ferociously. The Giant consumed a whole season's harvest, swelling to a colossal size. When the village could no longer support his appetite, Kumu, a wise elder, came before the mammoth creature and sang an ancient spell. The beast from the sea fell into deep slumber that day, and he has yet to wake.

At the Giant's feet, our dwelling rests. Schinah Jane works from home as an astrologer, mapping out the struggles and successes of her clients' lives by studying planets, positions, and birth charts. Kalehua, who changed her name after moving to the islands, is a massage therapist specializing in *lomilomi*, Hawaiian deep tissue massage. Reinventing herself, she took up hula dancing, learned to chant Hawaiian songs and make traditional instruments from hollowed, dried gourds. Kalehua, six-foot-two, with legs so long she can drive with her knees while playing the ukulele, always seems to be singing; even as she butters toast, a melody falls easily from her lips.

My mother, petite—curvy, yet slender, with brown eyes ringed with black-Indian kaja—finally found her place here, far from her New England upbringing. These women who raise me are as close as sisters. They dye their hair with henna, put egg whites and oats on their skin to keep it soft, and scent themselves with sandalwood oil. Most people think they are lovers, and they laugh and cackle when asked if I am their child. But in a way, I am—their *keike*, the baby girl they share.

Men come and go, floating in and out of our lives, but none stay. My mother, in love with animals of all kinds, brings home a cockatiel, a box turtle who roams around our living room, a one-eyed cat and a cockatoo.

The shape of my untraditional childhood is governed by my parent's custody agreement: I will spend school months with my mother and Kalehua, where I help with dinners, feed the pets, plant flowers and herbs in the garden, adhere to bedtime, learn to belly dance, play with my mother's Tarot cards, and study my signs—when there isn't homework to do. Summers, however, are wild cards in my life, and every June, July and August, I am taken from the cozy nucleus of home and turned over to the eccentric orbit of my father.

My mother paces and frets before each departure, packing her worry into my suitcase. The first summer I leave, at the age of three, she misses me so desperately her breasts grow swollen and leak.

I grow anxious too. For most kids, the end of the school year can never come fast enough. Not me. My belly fills with nervous energy.

"Your father loves you," my mother tells me, my bags packed and ready.

"I know," I say simply. "I just don't want to go."

"You'll have fun, you always do. Please promise me."

"I know, I know. I'll brush my hair and teeth."

"You know why you have to go?"

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you chose him."

I tilt my head. "How?"

My mother looks at me, dark brown eyes steady as she says, "Every baby, before it's born, makes a choice about the world to come. We have a soul, and that soul decides how and where to come through. You chose both of us, me and your Daddy."

And every June the adventure begins. I follow a mystical and captivating father who wears his hair long and draped across his

## A TANGLED TREE

back, who weaves flowers into his beard, who lives to travel, to sing, to pray and howl into the dawn and dark of night.

When he arrives, he scoops me up and throws me into the air. He holds me tight, and I breathe him in, olive oil and tobacco, the rich and musky scent of his skin. “My baby girl,” he whispers, stroking my hair. “My Mahamapoopoo number four, how I missed my sweet honey.” I hold onto his shoulders and press my face into his mane of golden hair. My nervousness folds into longing, for once I am in his arms I remember how much I need him. Once he has me, I am his again, and I breathe him in, hold him tight, and into the summer we go.

From a very early age, I am aware that my father is different. He sets himself apart, both deliberately and obliviously: his clothing, short and torn, his enchanting Eastern European accent, his long, tangled brown hair and wise man’s beard, his stories and life philosophy, his faith, his peculiar healing diet and lifestyle, a veiled but ferocious temper. There is both a bright spark of light that illuminates his soul and a dark shadow that flickers in his eyes.

My father prides himself on his freedom in the world. Though he possesses great wealth in property, he is bound to none, and comes and goes as he pleases. He is liberated from the obligations of work, established religions, laws, corporate capitalism, customs, courtesy and clothing. As his child, I adore him, and yet I am frightened by the sheer power of his personality. I observe how others perceive him: a wild-haired hippie, a barefoot bum, an enlightened being, a sage, a rabbi, a healer, a man who is filled with wisdom and refuses to conform.

As his child, I feel that I’m different too. His status, as either leader or rebel, rubs off on me in the eyes of the world. I stand in the light of his intrigue, shy and self-conscious, curious and quiet.

My childhood memories of Dad are sensory-saturated. When I think of my travels with him as a small girl, from the age of

three to eleven, I am flooded with sensations of the places he took me. The strange scenes, smells, tastes and feel of our summers together come back to me. Closing my eyes, I find myself a child again, swept up in Dad's extraordinary adventure.

In one memory I am running behind my father on Secret Beach, his favorite place to camp when he's on Kauai, where we live as beach bums, "liberated from Babylon." He is perpetually naked, his flat butt jiggling as he sprints ahead of me. I am wearing a bright pink bathing suit, chasing him as he howls and zigzags across the sand. Wind knots my hair, and my laughter propels me forward. I am wild, tangled, free.

Everyone is naked, as they should be on a nude beach, I suppose. I am a little girl, standing beside them, studying the differences between the forms before me. I think to myself: *That's a big one! That's a small one. That one's all covered in hair. It's like a Dr. Seuss book, I tell myself. Some are brown, and some are blond; some have hair, some have none.*

We have a community here, a village of tents and tarps tucked into the curve of the cliff. There is an outdoor kitchen, a fire pit filled with ash and embers, a mess of pots burned black from flames. People gather here and play instruments, guitars mostly, a harmonica, and deerskin drums that fill the rocky basin with resonance. "We were meant to live like this," my father tells me. "We were meant to live outside." The days are long here. We listen to the sound of the ocean's song. We bathe and drink from waterfalls. "God doesn't live in a house," my father says, sweeping his hands across the landscape, over the sandy shores dotted with lava stone, across the aqua sea, the seamless horizon. "God lives here, in the cathedral of the earth."

In another memory I am six years old and swimming in the holy Dead Sea. The water burns the blisters on my ankles, makes them ache and makes them heal. Dad is beside me, pointing west, toward a burning, setting sun. He turns in the thick water. "And see that, the mountains there? That's Jordan, another

## A TANGLED TREE

country beyond Israel.” We are floating, coated in salt, buoyant in a slowly sinking sea.

“What happened to the sea?” I ask my father. “Why did it die?”

“They call it *Yām HaMélah*, Sea of Salt,” my father says. “Lick your lips and taste.”

An acidic, metallic tang burns my tongue.

“You see,” my father says, holding me, “nothing wants to live in water that tastes like this.”

I remember hiding in a fort built of sleeping bags and blankets in the corner of our apartment in Jerusalem. Chin to knees, I am curled in on myself, hiding. He is fighting with a woman, a lover with hair as blond as desert sand. They are shouting, livid, and their fury becomes a storm that fills our living room. A plate shatters against a wall. A cooking pot clangs as it bounces over the cold tiles of the floor. His lover is screaming, stomping her feet. Then the back door slams shut, and a charged silence takes her place. There is no sound but my father’s agitated panting. The sound of my father’s heavy breath burns along the fetal curve of my spine. Knees pulled in, I coil tight and close my eyes.

That summer, living in Israel, I remember peeling pomegranates in a white dress. I am on our front porch, looking out at a tall clock tower perched in central Jerusalem. As I peel, beads of red soak into fabric. My father sits beside me at our home in the Holy Land and tells me this is where our people belong.

“Did you know,” he says, “that I lived here when I was a boy? On the other side of the country, by the sea, in a city called Haifa.”

I can still see his olive green eyes, his chestnut brown hair, his hands wide and open in his lap.

“We were very poor,” he tells me. “We ate bread with garlic, and my mother, your Bubbie, would say to me, ‘Close your eyes, and it will taste like beef.’ You see, we didn’t have money for more.” Tears fall into my father’s open hands.