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Creative Nonfiction
Personal Narrative Assignment

A Perfect Dawn

When I woke up that morning, I had missed the sunrise. It was our third day at the condo, and the third time that I had missed it. We only had one more morning left of waking up before moving to the other side of the island, where sunrises would be replaced by sunsets. One more opportunity to witness the blackness of the night disappear as the sun's brushstrokes painted the morning colors of orange, blue, and purple. I hadn't seen it yet, but I knew it would be beautiful when I did.

My husband Mike and I were due to leave on a 12 night cruise from Honolulu in three days. We had planned to spend four nights on the Windward Coast of Oahu before moving to the Leeward side of the island to spend two nights in Waikiki before the cruise. I'd spent over a year planning this trip, which was our belated honeymoon, and for months it had seemed that it might never arrive. A few days earlier, when our plane had landed at Honolulu airport I smiled from ear to ear and said to Mike "We are in HAWAII!" We had been traveling for eighteen hours, but my fatigue could not put a damper on the excitement. It had finally happened; we had finally made it to what I had built up in my mind as the most perfect place on Earth.

On the mainland, I'd been to my share of beach cities. Each of these places, while beautiful in its own way, revolved around tourism, with resorts and hotels abundant in every direction. The island of Oahu's main tourist trap is Waikiki Beach, which is on the edge of the city of Honolulu. With high-rises galore, Waikiki is like another Vegas, the only difference being that Vegas has casinos, and Waikiki has an ocean. Having done my research and not wanting to miss out on "True Hawaii," I rented a condo unit on the Windward Coast for our first four nights on the island, in the town of Punaluu. This part of the island had no resorts or hotels, and was a world away from Waikiki.

The balcony, or lanai, as they call it in Hawaii, had unobstructed views of the palm trees, the deserted beach, and the Pacific Ocean. It was from here that we would have an amazing view of the sunrise, if we could just get out of bed early enough to see it. We were staying in our own undiscovered paradise, far away from the crowds, fake luaus, and $10 Mai Tai cocktails of

Waikiki. The bedroom of the unit faced the Kamehameha Highway. Beyond that, we had views of the Kualoa Mountains in the distance: lush, rugged, and green.

The Kamehameha Highway hugs the windward shore and runs north and south. It isn't really a highway, but just a normal road, one lane going each way. Between the palm trees and hibiscus bushes, each side of the street is sprinkled with little beach houses, small schools and shopping centers, and the occasional shrimp truck. Handmade "billboards" from local residents can be seen: "Keep the Country the Country," and "50 years since statehood: 50 years of lies." The locals that we had met had been nothing but friendly, but it was clear that they never wanted Vegas skyscrapers and the commercialism of mainland America to intrude on their utopia.

That day we were going for a surf lesson on the North Shore and later on a tour of motion picture and television filming locations at Kualoa Ranch, where parts of *Lost* and *Jurassic Park* had been filmed. Located within the valley of the Kualoa Mountains, it was a majestic part of untouched Hawaii. Both activities had been planned and paid for well in advance; I wasn't good at many things, but I could plan an eighteen-night vacation down to the very last detail without the help of a travel agent, and I took pride in the fact that everything was organized and seamless.

That morning, the morning of April 20, 2010, I brushed my teeth and washed my face, and changed into my surfing clothes, which consisted of an orange floral *Roxy* dress over my bathing suit and white rubber flip flops. Mike was eating an apple on the couch and watching ESPN, already in his black and white floral swimming shorts and a white T-shirt, ready to go.

Soon it was time to leave, and I grabbed my tote bag with our beach towels, and we climbed into our rental car, a white Chevy Malibu. We set out north on the Kamehameha Highway. We enjoyed the sites, seeing more and more surfers along the coast as we got closer to our destination on the famous North Shore. We laughed at how we had been pronouncing the name of the road incorrectly for the first couple days of our trip. We had been calling it the KAMEY – HAMEY – HA Highway. When we went on a tour of Pearl Harbor a day earlier we had heard other people saying it correctly.

KA – MEHA – MEHA.

Still, we kept calling it the KAMEY – HAMEY – HA highway and dissolving into fits of laughter over it. Train's *Hey Soul Sister* was on the radio. It was still a new song, not having

been overplayed on mainland radio yet. It became the soundtrack to our trip, and now whenever we hear it, it instantly takes us back.

We were to meet our surf instructor in the parking lot of the famous North Shore restaurant, Jameson's, and from there we would follow her to the beach where we would learn to surf. Her name was Sunset Suzy, and I had seen her picture on her website. Tall, thin, and blonde, she looked like a classic surfer girl, like someone the Beach Boys would have sung about. We arrived on time at 11 AM, and Suzy was nowhere to be found. The workers at the restaurant eyed us curiously; they weren't even open yet, and surely were wondering what we were doing in their parking lot. I called Suzy on the phone and told her we were there. She said that she was running late and would arrive in a few minutes. Her voice sounded like the stereotypical surfer voice, with a dash of California Valley Girl thrown in. She was surely operating on "island time" and had a laid back attitude like the rest of the Hawaiian locals. While we were waiting we crossed the street and took some pictures on the beach there. When we walked back and she still wasn't there, I took a picture of our Chevy Malibu's Hawaiian license plate, a rainbow over a white background, with "Aloha State" written at the bottom.

Suzy pulled up, in a beat up old pick-up, with several surfboards in the bed of her truck. With an enthusiastic hello she introduced herself to us, and told us to follow her down the road to the spot where we'd be surfing, Puaena Point. We followed her, arriving at the beach parking lot about a minute later. We parked and walked over to her truck, where she was strategically changing into her bathing suit underneath her clothes.

Seeing her up close was alarming. She didn't look like she had in the photographs online. Her body was that of a model's, tall and athletic, but her skin did not match her physique. She was from the mainland, but was now as brown as a Hawaiian native. Years of surfing had aged her, and the amount of wrinkles she had would rival those of an elderly woman. She looked like the poster child for a public service warning about the dangers of tanning and skin cancer. I mentally reminded myself to slather on more SPF 40 before we went in the water.

We took off our cover-ups and left them in our car with our wallets and digital camera. The only things we brought with us were the car keys, a disposable waterproof camera, and our towels. Suzy gave us rash guards to put on, and instructed us to grab a surfboard, position it upside down, rest the center on our heads as we walked, and hold on to each side tightly. She led us through a narrow stretch of trees that separated the parking area from the beach. We could see

the ocean as the trees parted. Puaena Point looked like a small cove, and there were many other surf instructors and students along the shore and in the water. The water was relatively calm here, with little waves perfect for beginners. You could tell the true surfers from the amateurs…the surfers were tan, with incredible thigh muscles…the amateurs were pasty and pale like me, with little muscle to speak of. We settled down just beyond where the foliage cleared, and I sat our things under a tree.

Suzy had us lay out our boards on the sand and showed us the proper ways to position our bodies: how to lay stomach down across the board, wait for a wave, paddle, stand up on the board, glide, and break. While this was going on, an older Hawaiian man came over to Suzy. "Hi Suzy, how you doing, who do you have here?" he said. "These folks are from Philadelphia and I'm teaching them to surf," Suzy replied. "This is Bryan," she said to us. She seemed annoyed at the man, and it was obvious that they knew each other and had a complicated relationship. The man had short gray hair. He looked to be in his fifties, but since his skin was aged the same way Suzy's was, it was hard to say. He was short and slightly pudgy around the middle. He reminded me a little bit of a *California Raisin*. The two of them talked with forced pleasantries for a few more minutes, and then the man walked away. She rolled her eyes. "He owns his own surf school," she said. "Always giving people like me a hard time."

We continued to practice the surf moves on land, and soon we moved out to the shallow water. With Velcro straps attaching the leash of the boards to our right ankles, we entered the Pacific Ocean. "There are lots of turtles in the water here. You'll definitely see some!" Suzy told us. We each went out with Suzy one at a time to catch our first wave. Mike, being more athletic, got it on his first try. I watched from a distance and took some photos with the disposable camera, wishing that I had the digital so that I could zoom in. I watched in amazement as young children around me effortlessly surfed, making it look like they were walking on water. I confidently thought that I should have no problem doing it if these little kids could.

I was wrong! I wiped out on my first few attempts at trying to stand up. When I finally stood up (only for a few seconds before falling), I felt like I was in the Triple Crown of Surfing. In reality, it was barely a wave at all, and those little kids were putting me to shame. My turn was over, and Mike went out on the water with Suzy again. I lounged on my board in the shallow water while Mike and Suzy surfed in the distance, the sun's brushstrokes warming my bare legs. Soon they were too far away for me to see them. After a few minutes I saw Suzy swimming

toward me, without Mike. She called something out to me, but I couldn't understand her. As she got closer, I heard what she had been trying to tell me.

"He lost his wedding ring!"

She was paddling toward me, and I just stared at her. I didn't process what she had told me right away. "He felt his ring slip off. He's out looking for it now." She sounded upset. "Didn't I tell you guys to take your rings off?" I looked down at my hand, which still had my diamond wedding band on it. "No. I took off my engagement ring because I always do that when I swim, but I always leave my band on."

"I'm sorry—I should have made sure you took your rings off." She sounded unsure of what to say or do next, and kept apologizing. I wasn't mad at her—Mike never took his ring off, ever. Not even when he showered. It had never slipped off his hand. Why would we have thought it might happen this time?

Soon I saw Mike paddling toward us. He didn't look all that concerned. He insisted that he was going to keep looking for his ring, and that he knew the approximate place in the ocean where he had lost it, but he just needed a pair of goggles so he could see. Suzy went to her truck to see if she had any, and while she was gone the reality of what had happened began to sink in.

"You lost your ring in the OCEAN. It's gone—and it wasn't even insured yet, you never called to add the rings to our homeowner's insurance." I wasn't angry at him, just sad. The money didn't matter. It was unfortunate that we wouldn't be reimbursed for it, but that wasn't what I cared about. The ring I had put on his hand the day of our wedding was gone. We could get a new ring to replace it, but it wouldn't be the same, and for the next two weeks on our honeymoon my husband wouldn't have a wedding band. When we told people we were newlyweds, they would see he wasn't wearing a ring. I hated when married men didn't wear rings, and my husband would look like one of those guys. It was gone. I held back tears as I let the disappointment and enormity of it wash over me. It seemed as if I should have known this was going to happen…something bad seems to always happen, somehow things always get messed up. I was a fool to believe that this Hawaiian vacation would go as planned.

"I know where I lost it at…I think I can find it." I told him he was crazy. It would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack, literally. Sure the water wasn't more than waist deep and was crystal clear in most spots, but it was still impossible to find a tiny ring in the ocean. Suzy came back—no goggles. The *California Raisin*, Bryan, was on the beach and Suzy told him what

had happened. “One of my students lost their wedding ring…do you have goggles he can use?” Bryan gave us a pair of goggles, and told Mike that sometimes the lifeguards kept waterproof metal detectors at their stations. Mike went into the water to continue looking for his ring. Suzy and I continued our surf lesson, although I didn’t care about surfing anymore.

While waiting for waves we talked a little bit. She was from Arizona, and had moved to Hawaii twenty years ago. The only thing she did for a living was teach surfing. It seemed like the perfect life. “Check it out, look; there’s a turtle there in the water!” I looked down, and a large Hawaiian turtle, about three feet in diameter, was directly under my surfboard. It was amazing, but I didn’t really care. I kept thinking about how Mike was off in the water alone, searching for his ring. This was supposed to be our surf lesson *together*…

After a little while I told Suzy I was tired and didn’t want to surf anymore. I was just going to sit on the beach and wait for Mike to finish his hopeless search. She told me it had been nice to meet us, and she was really sorry about the ring. If we had time before leaving Oahu, give her a call, and she’d happily finish the rest of our surf lesson free of charge. I thanked her, helped her carry the boards to her truck, and then she left.

Back on the beach, I stood around awkwardly not really knowing where to go or what to do. I picked up my tote bag that had been left under the tree, and suddenly Bryan called over to me. “Hey! We have a pop-up canopy set up over there. You’re welcome to sit with us while you wait.” I didn’t want to sit with a bunch of strangers, but I didn’t want to be rude. I could feel the hot sun taking its toll on my fair skin. I thanked him, and went over to the canopy.

Bryan ran a surf school, his sons being the main teachers now. Everyone called him Uncle Bryan. “Where did you hear about that surf school you went to today?” he asked. “Google. And Tripadvisor.” He told me that it was best to take lessons from a Hawaiian, not from someone who wasn’t a native. His one son held up his ring finger. “See I’ve got mine tattooed on. I never wear jewelry in the water, and I never let my clients wear it either.” I know Suzy made a mistake, but that had nothing to do with her being born on the mainland…I’d heard about prejudice like this on the islands, but this was the first time I’d seen it in action. I guess Hawaii wasn’t so perfect after all.

Mike decided to walk down to the lifeguard stations and seek out a waterproof metal detector. He went to two different lifeguard stations, and both told him that they didn’t have one. When he came to tell us the bad news, Bryan said he had a friend that he could call who had one.

He made the call, and after about a half hour, a tall skinny man with long gray hair showed up, wearing a straw hat and hippie-like clothing. The man stripped down to a wet suit and joined Mike in his search for the ring.

It was approaching 2:30 PM, and we were supposed to be at the condo showering and getting ready for the movie location tour. But we weren't at the Windward condo showering; we were on the North Shore looking for a needle in a haystack. The tour stared at 3:30 PM and it was looking less and less likely that we would make it. A perfectly planned day ruined. I called the tour company and told them our situation and they told me that they couldn't refund our money. $180 down the drain. I sat and sulked under Bryan's canopy, vaguely listening to his family's conversations, and anxiously playing with my phone. I updated my Facebook status: "Mike lost his wedding ring in the Pacific Ocean!" Earlier I had written about how great our day would be: "Surfing on the North Shore and then doing a tour of *Lost* filming locations!" So much for that.

Then, I saw the long gray hair of the hippie with the metal detector approaching Bryan. They laughed, and Bryan turned to me with a huge smile on his face.

"He found it!" Bryan said. I couldn't believe it. "What?!" I asked incredulously. "He found the ring!" Suddenly I realized what this meant: it was not gone. The memory of my wedding day, of putting the ring on Mike's finger, the symbol of that memory wasn't lost. I was ecstatic, and everyone was cheering and clapping. Bryan gave me a hug, and I turned to the stranger with the long gray hair and thanked him profusely. He shook his head. "I didn't find it. Your husband found it all by himself." Mike soon appeared, tired and wet, having been searching for over 2 hours. Everyone congratulated him on finding it. "I saw something shiny and thought it was a bottle cap. I reached down and touched it, and it was my ring."

We said goodbye to all the locals who had helped us, and Mike gave the man with the long gray hair $60 for his trouble. It isn't often that a stranger will take time out of his day to help someone search for a wedding ring lost in the ocean.

In the car on the way back to the condo, driving south on the KAMEY – HAMEY – HA highway, Mike told me that he had seen tons of turtles and fish while looking for his ring, like it had been his own little snorkeling excursion. "This kind of stuff only happens in the movies—I didn't think there was any way that you would find it!" I said. It was too bad we had to miss the Kualoa Ranch tour, but at least we had found the ring, so it wasn't for nothing.

As we walked in the door of our condo, my cell phone rang. “Hello?” I said. “Hi, Angela? This is your tour guide for the 3:30 Kualoa tour. Are you on your way?” I explained to him that we had gotten held up on the North Shore, and we wouldn’t be able to make it. “Well, how far are you? If you’re Windward we can wait for you.” I looked at Mike with my eyes wide—was it possible that this day might still work out the way it was supposed to? I told him we could be there in twenty minutes if he didn’t mind waiting. “No problem, we can wait twenty minutes.” Thank goodness for “island time”!

No time for showers, we quickly changed out of our bathing suits, put on fresh clothes and ran out the door. In twenty minutes we were at beautiful Kualoa Ranch, on Hawaii’s breathtaking Windward Coast, seeing some of the most gorgeous views in the world. We were probably smelly. My hair was a mess. The backs of my legs were fried from forgetting to apply extra SPF. But we didn’t care. We were in paradise, and it was perfect.

The next morning Mike woke me up early enough to see the sunrise through our lanai. It was cloudy, and the most I could see of the sun was a few rays painting the sky orange, but it was still incredible and stunning.

When I look back on the day Mike lost his ring, I remember it as one of the best days of my life. It made me a believer in miracles. It’s a lesson I’ve learned over and over again, but it was that day that really made the lesson stick. I freak out when something bad happens, but somehow things always seem to work out, for good or for bad—life goes on. Still, it’s in my nature to panic. The pessimist in me never expects the outcome of a crisis to be good, and I always prepare for the worst. Now, when something terrible happens, I think of the wedding ring, and remember that I don’t need to always be so pessimistic. Not everything will end in tragedy. There’s hope in even the darkest of circumstances.

We’ve told the story to many people, and not everyone believes it. I don’t even have any pictures from the surf lesson, because the disposable waterproof camera was ruined in processing. But I know it happened. I’ll forever love the “country” part of Oahu and remember it as the most perfect place on Earth.