**Eucalyptus Trees**

**by Pooja Subramaniam**

Nathan had still not finished his assignment. It was due at midnight. The angry red lines on his alarm clock mocked him. 11:36, they read. He needed a break. A quick five-minute walk around the block, and then he’d come back to the problem he was stuck on. Nathan slid into his Nike sneakers and a gray rain jacket. The night looked clear, but Seattle weather was not to be trusted. He left his apartment door unlocked and hustled down the stairs. The brisk wind was a welcomed relief from the stale apartment air that leaked from his radiator. He turned the corner of the block, taking in the night and breathing deeply. Nathan looked around. College campuses didn’t often look calm, but on this Tuesday night at 11:38, it could pass for suburbia. The wind whistled through the trees and crickets sang their songs. He let the white noise engulf him as he continued his walk, clearing his mind from his homework assignment. Nathan made one more right turn. He could no longer see his apartment complex from this corner of the block. He shrugged his shoulders in circles and stretched his neck as he walked, looking down at the concrete and his black shoes.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Nathan whipped his head up. These words were not part of his peaceful, white noise, mind-clearing walk sounds. About 20 feet ahead was a girl crouched beside a bike that was locked to the post of a stop sign. She was toying with the lock with what looked like a pair of pliers. Nathan looked around: it didn’t seem like she was speaking to anyone in particular. For a moment, he thought about turning around and walking back home, avoiding all situations of potential bike thieves and frustrated girls. But just a week earlier, his own bike had been stolen and now he was forced to walk around campus, too broke to afford another bike. Hoping to save another helpless peer from this fate, he walked up to the girl at the stop sign. He took his hood off as he walked up to her, hoping to look as nonthreatening as possible: she was still a girl, alone at night, and he was still a stranger and a man.

“If you’re trying to steal that bike, I’ll have to call the cops.” She hadn’t noticed him coming up behind her as she continued to fiddle with the pliers. The girl turned around but seemed unfazed. “This is my bike. I lost the keys to the lock.” She turned back around to the lock, continuing to swear under her breath.

“How do I know that’s true? What if you’re just stealing some poor dude’s bike?” Nathan asked again. He was standing a few feet from her, both for her sake and his. Those pliers could probably do some damage if she were deranged, and he still didn’t want to startle her.

She turned around again, this time clearly annoyed at his questions. She tilted her head to the side and sighed. “Don’t you think if I was a bike thief, I’d be better at stealing bikes than this? Or I’d own a pair of bolt clippers? Or I would have ran when I saw you? Or I’d do this later in the night?”

Nathan considered this for a moment. She was right, he guessed. There was still the small chance she was just the world’s shittiest bike thief, but it was probably just her bike. Nathan checked his watch again. 11:45. There went his 5-minute walk. He considered his options: he could stay here and offer to help this girl steal her own bike, cementing his belief that he was, indeed, a good Samaritan, or he could turn in his homework on time. The answer seemed obvious.

“Well, do you need help then? Stealing your own bike, I mean.”

She looked back up at him, sizing him up. “How could you help? Do you steal bikes and have the right tools?”

“I probably have something better than shitty pliers from the 1800s.”

“Ouch.” The girl said, her voice tinged with sarcasm. She stood up and wiped her palms off on her pants and then held her hand out. “I’m Maya”

“Nathan. Sorry I thought you were a bike thief.”

“Nah, that’s okay. I probably looked like one.”

“My apartment is around the block and my landlord has a bunch of tools in the basement that he never locks up.” Nathan paused. “Okay, I know that sounds creepy, but he’s a good guy. I think. I can run and grab them if you want and be back in a few minutes.”

Maya peered closely at Nathan, examining him for the second time that night. “I can come with you.” She must have deemed him unthreatening enough of a stranger, and so when Nathan nodded and turned around, she followed close behind. On the way, they chatted about their individual majors (Nathan studied math while Maya studied accounting), their shared senior year nostalgia, and Nathan’s homework assignment deadline. It was 12:03 when he walked into his apartment building.

“Well, there goes your homework assignment.”

“I get one dropped assignment and I wasn’t going to finish it anyways. Don’t feel too bad that I’m helping you.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t.” Maya smiled at him, a toothy grin that felt too warm to give a new acquaintance at a little after midnight on a Tuesday night.

Nathan laughed and headed down into the basement. “I’m going to wait up here!” Maya called as he skipped down the stairs. In the basement, Nathan roamed around until he found a big pair of branch clippers, a hammer, and some WD-40. Walking up the stairs, he cradled the tools in his arms and pulled open the door with his toes.

“Wow. This could definitely be the beginning of a serial killer horror movie. Me watching me on TV would be screaming right now.” Maya was still smiling as she said this, grabbing the clippers from his arms to lighten his load.

“If I was really a serial killer wouldn’t I have killed you earlier? Or tried to hide it better? Or have better tools to do it?” He mocked her, daringly. She tilted her head back and laughed, eyes closed. Her laugh had a deep tonality that he liked the sound of. They began to walk back to where Maya’s bike was still locked up, chatting more along the way. Nathan found out that Maya was originally from Seattle and had been planning to attend the University of Washington since high school while Maya found out that Nathan was from California, but born in Hawai’i, and hated the lack of sun but loved the theoretical mathematics program.

When they reached the bike, Nathan sat down next to it and put his tools down with him. He admitted to Maya that he didn’t have the slightest idea of how the WD-40 or the hammer would aid in the process but brought them along just in case. After several more minutes of swearing, one almost-severed-by-the-clippers finger, and useless hammering, the chain finally gave in to the strength of the industrial clippers and fell to the sides of the bike. Nathan moved the bike away from the stop-sign post and brought it towards Maya, who had been offering her insights on the process from in front of him.

“So, you promise this is your bike?” Nathan joked one last time. “I don’t feel like being an accomplice to grand theft today.”

“Either way, it’s too late now!” Maya retorted, grabbing her bike and wheeling it to the sidewalk. Nathan joined her at the sidewalk, and silence engulfed them momentarily.

“Thanks a lot for the help. I am sorry about your assignment. I kind of derailed your night.” Maya fiddled with the handlebars of her bike as she said this, making not-quite eye contact with Nathan.

“I had a fun night. Thanks for not thinking I was a serial killer.”

“Well… I should go then. Got my bike and all.” Maya hesitated before she slowly climbed onto her bike, loitering a moment longer than necessary, adjusting her gears and making sure her light was on.

Nathan looked at her again. Her skin was the color of the brown spots on rainbow eucalyptus tree bark, a rich chocolate color he hadn’t seen anywhere other than the trees around his childhood home. Maya had big, bold eyes and long hair that was pulled up into a loose ponytail. She looked ordinary from afar, but up close, he began to realize, she was quite pretty.

“I’m hungry. And honestly, I think you owe me a slice of pizza for saving your bike for you. Or being your accomplice. Either way, Main St. Pizza is open until 4 a.m. and I’m dying for a cheese slice. You’re paying.” Nathan motioned towards Main St, hoping that Maya would follow and that she didn’t have a morning class, a boyfriend, or a responsible diet. Maya looked confused for a moment, then laughed again with her head tilting back and eyes closed. A full laugh that used her whole body.

“Okay, but you only get a cheese slice. That bike saving wasn’t worth the extra dollar-fifty for toppings.” Maya picked up her bike and changed directions, moving herself to be between the bike and Nathan. Together, they walked towards Main St, discussing pizza toppings, the statistics around serial killers, and things in between. When they reached the small pizza shop, they quickly occupied the cozy booth in the back, sitting there, across from one another far after their slices were eaten. Maya talked about the job she had lined up in Seattle for after college and her passion for ceramics, and Nathan nodded along.

“I couldn’t imagine having my life all planned out like that. Doesn’t it drive you crazy, to know exactly what your life will look like in a year?”

“It actually calms me. I couldn’t imagine not having a plan for my life. If I didn’t have a five year plan I would just feel aimless. Not that being less-planned-out is a bad thing,” Maya clarified. “Floaters just view life as a game they go through and I’m viewing it as a game I’m trying to win.”

Nathan chuckled. “I guess I’m a floater. It’s just that so many of my friends feel like they need to have their lives lined up after college and it just confuses me. Aren’t we here to learn, not just to find jobs?” Maya shook her head at this, playing with her half-eaten crust for a minute before she answered.

“I guess I have a lot of desires out of life. I want to create art. I also want a house with granite counter tops. I’ve figured out a way to balance all of that. Anyways, accounting is fun. It’s like a puzzle. The job pays really well and has lots of room to get promoted. I’ll work decent hours, make ceramic bowls on weekends, and eat cereal in that bowl off of granite countertops.”

Nathan leaned back in his booth and smiled. He rested his head in his interlaced fingers above his shoulders and nodded.

“It’s a good plan.”

Maya smirked. “So, is it my turn to ask an intrusive question now?”

“That wasn’t an intrusive question!”

“It was! You’ve figured out I’m hopelessly type A, boring and uptight.”

“I guess you’re right, I have figured all that out now. It’s only fair for you to learn something just as horrifying about me,” said Nathan, sarcasm dripping off his voice.

Maya giggled and rolled her eyes, then leaned close to him across the table with a flourish. “So, tell me about your relationship with your parents.” Her voice mimicked one of those talk-show hosts and Nathan knew she was teasing. He chuckled along with her.

“Seriously, you can ask me something.” He prodded her on.

“I did ask you something!”

“That was a joke.” When she shook her head, he sighed. “Okay. Pass. Lifeline. Ask me a different intrusive question.”

“No! I want you to answer that one now.” He paused for a second and she tilted her head. Nathan’s face must have communicated his unease because Maya spoke again, this time more softly.

“I’m joking. You don’t have to answer that. Hmm… okay, tell me your favorite book.”

Nathan shook his head. It might have been the cozy booth, the way Maya’s laugh felt home, or the lack of sleep, but he felt comfortable in that moment, as if he was supposed to be there.

“My mom is my best friend, my role model, and the best person I know. She’s always taken such good care of me. My dad was a great guy too. He loved adventure and could make anyone laugh. He became friends with everyone he met. They separated when I was a kid, around 8 I think? So I don’t remember him too well, but my mom talks about him a lot. My dad was a drinker and my mom is the queen of second chances. But my mom still lives in San Diego and going home to her is the best break from school a guy could want. My little sister is five, she’s technically my half-sister, and my stepdad is an okay guy. But even though she’s so young, I already know she’s so smart. Smarter than me at least.” The words tumbled out of Nathan’s mouth, leaving little room for breath. Maya reached out and put her hand on top of Nathan’s, which was shaking the tiniest bit. The *is* and *was* differentiation did not go unnoticed by her.

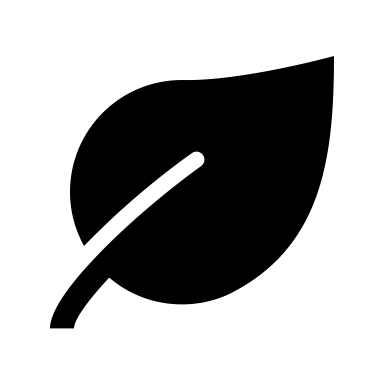
“My little brother is smarter than me too. At least they’ll take care of us when they’re older.” Maya joked. Nathan laughed, but didn’t move his hand. Her palm was warm, the slightest bit sweaty, but it felt good.

It was 4 a.m. when the sole employee in Main St. Pizza had to ask Maya and Nathan to leave. They begrudgingly left their booth and stepped back into the night. It had gotten colder, and Nathan’s rain jacket no longer was enough to cut the wind.

“Well, I’ll see you around then?” Nathan asked, unsure how to close out the night they had shared. Maya handed Nathan her cellphone, open to the new contact page. Silently, he put his number in.

“I’ll text you the next time I need to steal my bike,” Maya said slyly, resting one foot on the pedal.

“You could even text me before that,” Nathan answered. She looked back and waved before she biked away, in the opposite direction of his apartment. Nathan began his walk back home. In a few minutes, he was back to apartment door. It opened easily and Nathan cursed himself for not having locked it earlier. He checked his alarm clock as he walked into his room, careful not to wake his roommate. The clock read 4:11. Shaking his head, Nathan collapsed onto his bed, not even bothering to remove his street clothes or glasses. He thought back to a story his mom always told him, about how she had met his dad. He smiled to himself: if he had any game, it definitely was not from his father. *“He just came up to us like he owned the bar’*”, your mom used to tell you. *“Barely remembered to introduce himself.”*



David was only 17 years old when the army recruiter had shown up at his small, backcountry high school and asked him if he had wanted to join the army. College isn’t for boys like you, the recruiter had said, nodding his head as if he could read David’s future and potential in a quick moment. The army will teach you how to be a man, how to defend your country, the recruiter had told him. *“Canada needs you. Canadians need you.”* These words had stuck with David. He picked up a flier and less than a year later, he was attending a bootcamp in Alberta. It had been five years since David joined the army. In these years, he had helped civilians set up water filtration systems in small villages, learned how to pass hours of boredom with a pack of cards, pleased women with whom he did not share a language, and wasted time with other, equally useless men. For the past three months David had been stationed in Hawai’i; sand somehow found its way into his boots every morning, and the ocean could be seen through his dormitory window. David fucked around on a surfboard some mornings and found himself buying fewer packs of exorbitantly priced cigarettes on the island, but otherwise, this posting was seemingly no different than his others. It was his first stationing as an officer, and David was fitting into his role naturally. He was never good at taking orders, and this made him very good at giving orders. Even as an officer, he was still invited to play poker, drink cheap beer, holler at local women with his men.

One evening, still not completely cured of their hangovers from the night before, David and a few of his platoon found themselves in a tacky bar, filled with tiki torches, women in leis serving drinks to tourists, and small purple umbrellas scattered on the sticky floor. The smell of stale beer, sea salt, and perfume mixed together in the air. Out of the corner of his eye, a shiny black curl that tucked itself around a delicate jaw caught his attention. From his spot, perched on a bar stool, both elbows on the table and bent over a beer, David could only see the profile of the woman. She was sitting with a friend, nodding and laughing along to what looked like an animated retelling of a dramatic tale. David tipped the last sips of beer into his mouth, stood up, smoothed his khakis and walked over to her. It was either the beer or the boredom that motivated his decision: he’d never remember which.

David stopped in front of her and her friend, cutting off the conversation with his presence. Two expectant pairs of eyes stared at him, filling the newfound silence. Upon closer examination, the woman with the shiny black hair had almond shaped eyes, with irises so dark they reminded David of small pots of black ink. The silence extended before the friend cleared her throat.

“Hi. Do we know you?” David eyes darted away from the woman and back at her friend.

“No miss, you don’t.” An empty stool was nearby, and David dragged it over to the two women. “But that story you were telling looked so good, I had to come over here and listen to it myself.”

The women laughed. “I’m David, Lieutenant in the Canadian Army. Who do I have the pleasure of spending my evening with?” he asked, extending his hand to the two women.

“Delilah,” the blond friend smiled back. “It’s a pleasure.”

Taking her friends’ cue, the woman also extended her hand, but more skeptically. “Hana. Like the road on Maui.” Her voice was gravelly and her handshake was strong. David looked at her closely and she held his eye contact. They stood there for a moment, their hands and eyes locked. David was the one to break the silence.

“Maui, huh? Haven’t been, but I’ll keep an eye out for a road that’s named after a beautiful woman. So, what was the story that I so rudely interrupted? I’m still curious.”

For the next couple of hours David laughed and drank with Hana and Delilah, swapping stories about embarrassing one-night stands, stressful family reunions, and adventurous hikes around the island. David sat close to Hana and watched her throw her head back when she laughed and felt her body warmth when she turned towards him to offer David the rest of her beer. He liked the way she listened closely when he or Delilah told a story, nodding and laughing and interjecting in rhythm with their stories. She rested her cheek in her hand as she listened, smiling lightly and never taking her eyes off of the storyteller. At around midnight, Delilah called it a night, mentioning a boyfriend’s apartment as she left. Delilah kissed David on the cheek and said goodnight, then whispered something into Hana’s ear that made her giggle and shake her head. After that, it was just David and Hana. David dragged his stool closer to her, bringing his face about a foot from hers.

“So, Hana-like-the-road-on-Maui. Why are you here?”

“Why am I here? Like in this bar, on this Saturday night? Or why am I here like on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?”

“Both, I guess. I meant the former, but now that the latter is on the table, I think I’m more curious about that.”

She chuckled. He liked that he could make her laugh. “I’m here working for the US government on indicators of marine life for endangered species of coral. I studied marine biology in my undergrad, and much to my parents’ chagrin, actually decided to make a career out of it. Why are you here? On an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, I mean.”

“Ah. You’re witty.”

She blushed. David took a second to think about how to make his life and work sound interesting, but settled, like he often did, on the truth.

“So,” he started, after taking a breath, “after high school I had no real interests, so I joined the Canadian army because I thought I’d get to shoot guns. I mostly run drills and only shoot the shit.”

“And you meet women at bars and tell them the few funny stories you have in an effort to get them to sleep with you.”

“It’s not explicitly in the job description, but it is core to the role.”

“I’m sure…” Hana chuckled to herself. David shook his head.

“No really, I love meeting new people. I think, moving around so much, it makes it hard to make long term connections. So, yeah, I go to bars and talk to people and try to find really exciting sparks of connection.”

Hana watched him closely, her eyes widening at this piece of unexpected vulnerability. “So do you think you’ve found that tonight?”

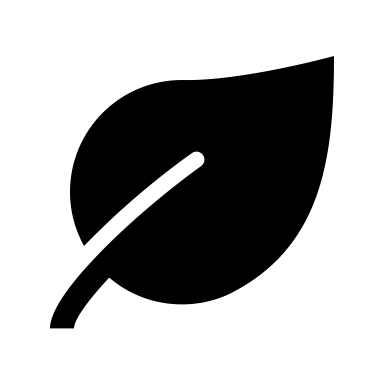
David smiled and finished off his beer. “Yeah, I think I have.”

When the bar closed at 2 a.m., Hana and David were forced to leave their corner of the drink counter and venture into the dark, humid night. Outside the bar, eucalyptus trees lined the small road and filled the air with a fragrant scent. The couple were far enough away from Hilo to not feel the light pollution of the city: the stars formed a shield overhead, shifting the darkness from eerie to intimate. They paused on the curb, shrugging into their light raincoats and exchanging a knowing look. The moment was a threshold. To pass by, or to step over: the question was not said, but both knew it to be there.

“The base isn’t far from here. Maybe a five-minute walk. And in the mornings, you can see the sunrise over the ocean.” David broke the silence first.

“That sounds oddly peaceful.”

And so, the decision was made.



It was Friday when Maya finally texted Nathan. He had most definitely not been glancing at his phone for the past couple of days, waiting for a text. He also had not at all been looking her up on Facebook, and he would never have debated sending her a friend request when he finally found her. Her text, when it came, was simple: “I found my bike lock keys. They were in my backpack.” Nathan chuckled when he saw the text and shook his head. He texted back right away. “Damn. That’s unlucky.” A moment after he sent the text, he saw she was typing back. “I’m going to buy a new bike lock tonight. Want to be a part of the final episode of this saga?” Nathan smiled when he saw the text. Maya seemed funny in a way that didn’t try too hard, witty without being obnoxious. He quickly texted back his address and said to pick him up around 8 p.m. Those definitely were not butterflies in his stomach.

Maya rolled around fifteen minutes past 8, saying something about a genetic disposition to tardiness when Nathan pointed at his watch while getting into the car. They drove to a bike shop about a mile off campus, parked, and wandered inside the store.

“Maybe you should get a lock with a code this time. You obviously aren’t ready for a big-girl lock or a key.” Nathan held up a lock with a 4-digit code.

“Nah, if anything, I learned that my lock is too easy to break. If some random guy with his landlord’s tools can break it then anyone can. I think I’m going to invest in a U-lock” Nathan laughed and shook his head. He continued to wander around the bike shop without Maya as she finished her purchase. From the helmet aisle he found himself in, Nathan could see Maya’s side profile. Her hair was down today, and her wavy locks reached her midback. She was chatty with the cashier, asking about his day and telling him the story about her bike lock. He liked that she talked to strangers like they were her friends. Her smile and thank you to the cashier were genuine, and when he made a bad joke about her new lock, Maya’s laugh wasn’t out of pity.

Noticing that Maya was walking towards him, Nathan turned his attention back towards the helmets. There was a yellow one with little smiley faces on it that he immediately liked the look of. As Maya approached him, before she could say anything, he took the helmet and placed it on her head, fitting it over her hair and pulling the straps down. She laughed and struck a pose.

“I like it. You should buy it.” Nathan declared.

“I don’t need a helmet, I only ride on campus.” Maya said back as she began to remove the it from her head.

“What? No, you definitely need a helmet. I feel like so many people probably drive drunk around here…” Maya made a face at that.

“Ugh. Who let fraternity brothers get drivers licenses in the first place?”

“Did you know that 75% of U.S. Senators are from fraternities?”

Maya shook her head and sighed. “That explains so much.” Nathan laughed at her answer and started walking towards the register with the bright yellow helmet under his arm.

“Where are you going with that?” Maya called, trailing a few feet behind him.

Silently, Nathan walked up to the cashier and handed him the yellow helmet and his credit card. He tried his hardest not to smile as Maya tried to get in the way of his purchase, holding her at arm’s length and asking the cashier to please ignore her. The cashier chuckled at the two of them, rung up the helmet, and handed it back to Nathan.

“Why did you buy that? There’s no way I’m actually wearing it.”

“You have to. It’s for your safety. Plus, I don’t have a suit that fits right now so I’d have nothing to wear to a funeral if you were hit by a drunk-driving future senator.” Nathan took the yellow helmet and placed it on her head, clipping it under her chin. The act felt intimate. He brushed a strand of hair that had fallen in her face and tucked it behind the helmet strap. They stood there for a moment, not saying anything.

“I’m hungry.” Maya said. She didn’t move away from Nathan, and he didn’t move away from her. They stood there, for a few breaths, close enough for it to mean something, far enough away to pretend the moment had not happened. Nathan stepped back first.

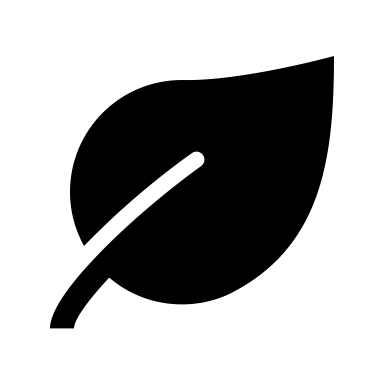
“I know a place with a great cheese slice, and I hear they have a booth reserved for us.”

Maya laughed and started walking towards her car. “I’ll pay.” As the both climbed into Maya’s small car, Nathan glanced at a church across the street with a large sign proclaiming “Christ Church”

“My parents got married in a chapel called “Christ Church.” Nathan mentioned as he buckled himself into the car.

“Yeah, your parents and half of the Catholics on the Western Hemisphere. Could they choose a more obvious name?” Maya tied her hair up into a bun and began to put the car in reverse.

Nathan laughed. “Get driving, I’m starving.”



David and Hana had wanted to elope, but Hana’s parents insisted on a proper wedding. White dress, buffet, first dance, the whole thing. They were married in a small church in Hilo exactly a year after they day they had met. It was an intimate wedding: Hana’s parents had flown in from California, David’s mother had come in from Minnesota, and their friends on the island came for them and stayed for the open bar. They decided to write their own vows, scrapping a ceremony of nonsensical bible verses, much to David’s mothers’ chagrin, for inside jokes and love-filled commitments. David promised to always take care of Hana, to make her breakfast every Sunday, to tuck her hair behind her ears whenever it got in her face, and to kiss her goodnight for the rest of their lives. Hana vowed to always need David, to listen to him, to climb waterfalls and hike rainforests with him, to love him enough to ignore his record collection of The Police, and to kiss him goodnight for the rest of their lives too.

The night began to dwindle down shortly after midnight. Friends found their ways home, some alone, some with new consorts, the cake was half eaten, and the bar where they met, the location of their reception, was beginning to clear out. David looked over at his bride, her white, tea length dress speckled with drops of beer and sweat, and smiled. In that moment, he felt whole. Hana sensed his gaze on her back and turned around; she ran her fingers through the hair on the back of his head and her hand came to rest on the nape of his neck.

“How are you, sweetie?” Hana asked.

“I’ve never been better, baby,” David answered. David glanced around at the few guests loitering at the bar and turned back towards Hana.

“Wanna get out of here?”

“I was waiting for you to ask.”

The next morning, David woke up in a honeymoon suite of a three-star hotel, hungover, still tired, and entirely infatuated with the woman beside him. He turned to his side and rested his head on his hand, facing his wife who was sleeping peacefully on her back. Her makeup was smeared, but David found her racoon eyes endearing. He took a finger and hooked a lock of hair behind Hana’s ear. This small motion woke her up, and her eyes opened groggily and rested on David’s face.

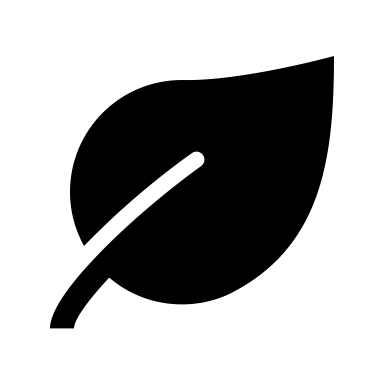
“Hiya honey, good morning.”

“Good morning, Hana.” The sun came streaming in from a small slit in the curtains and landed exactly on Hana’s face. David traced her cheekbones with his finger absentmindedly.

“What do you want to do today?” She asked him, propping herself up into a sitting position on the bed. Her dress was strewn across the floor on the opposite side of the room. A few rose petals were scattered across the bed, something David and Hana had laughed at earlier in the night. *So corny it hurts,* they had said about it. David sat up next to Hana and looked at her warm, almost-black eyes. He didn’t want to do anything. He wanted to stay in this room for the rest of their lives, protected by pristine white sheets and yellow-glowing lamps.

Instead, David took her hand between his.

“We can do whatever you want to, baby. We have our whole lives ahead of us.”



Nathan knew the ball was in his court. He had to text first. After their second night at Main St. Pizza, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her. With her soft dark hair, full lips, smart comebacks, and insightful opinions, Maya was, in Nathan’s eyes, unimaginably perfect. He stared down at his phone and opened up their conversation for the 10th time that day. Shaking his head, he forced himself to just type. “Dinner tonight? Main St?”. As soon as he sent the text, he saw three bubbles pop up. She sent her response quickly. “I’m sick of pizza. Let’s cook. My place at 7:30?” Nathan smiled down at his phone. His roommate, who was sitting on the other side of the kitchen table they were doing homework at, teased Nathan gently.

“Maya? You don’t look at the phone like that when I text you.”

“Shut up.” Nathan swatted his comment away in the air.

“Maybe you’ll finally find love, dude. Ask someone out for once.”

Nathan winced. Arjun, who he had been his roommate since freshman year, loved to remind Nathan that he had a lustless and loveless college experience. It’s not like Arjun hadn’t tried to set him up: three girls had gone on dates with him through the past four years, and a second date had not come out of any of them.

At 7:30 sharp, Nathan showed up at Maya’s door. He had changed shirts four times and had settled on a soft gray t-shirt that complemented his grey-green eyes well (his mother had told him when he bought the shirt with her). When she opened the door, the smell of eucalyptus and spearmint drifted through the door. He breathed it in. It smelled like home in Hawai’i, where eucalyptus trees lined their garden. The aroma filled the room he walked into: it felt like safety and love, tinged with uncertainty. He looked at Maya, diverting his attention from the candles he now saw lit in the center of the table, the source of the eucalyptus scent. She was wearing casual blue jeans and a tight, black turtleneck shirt. She smiled at him and gestured for him to come in. Her apartment didn’t look very different than his: the plates set on the table were not from the same set, the forks were not identical, and there was no tablecloth on the old, wooden dining table. But to Nathan, the apartment was the type of romantic he saw in those old eighties movies his mom liked.

“Wow. You really went all out. But I think you might have forgotten the food.” Nathan waved his hand towards the empty plates.

“You thought I was going to cook all by myself? No way, there are veggies to be cut and pasta to be boiled – all by you.” Maya rolled her eyes at his comment but laughed, turning towards the kitchen. Nathan followed her.

“I thought you were cooking! I was just here for an easy dinner plan.”

“I’m honestly offended, I thought you were coming to hang out with me.”

“Nope. Food only.” Nathan smiled as he teased Maya. Their easy banter made being here, in her kitchen, a bit less nerve raking. Over the next half hour, the two of them prepared their dinner between jokes, teasing, and a bit of conversation. They brought their meal to the table and sat down near each other, quiet for a few moments as they dug into their meals.

“So good. This is amazing.” Maya shoveled her food into her mouth quickly and Nathan did the same. Cooking took much longer than anticipated and the two of them had worked up an intense appetite. 20 minutes later, Nathan and Maya sat at the table with empty plates, crumpled napkins, and full bellies. Maya started picking up the dishes and walking them towards the kitchen, waving off Nathan’s offer to help. Sitting at the table by himself, Nathan smiled to himself. This was one of the best evenings he’d had in a while.

After a minute of soaking in his own happiness, Nathan paused. What was he doing here, in this dining room with this girl he barely knew? His mind went back to when he overheard his freshman year crush whisper to another girl that he was not “boyfriend material”. Nathan’s feelings weren’t hurt because it was true. Nathan had never been in a relationship before, and he’d barely even tried. He was not, in anyone’s definition, a lady’s man. Plus, most relationships never really lasted. Like all things sweet, they eventually rotted. It was senior year and he was not looking for something serious – or anything at all. Shaking his head, Nathan stepped back from his own thoughts and stood up at the dining table. He barely knew this girl, why was he even thinking of a relationship? Nathan walked back to the kitchen where Maya had just finished putting the plates into her dishwasher.

“Do you need any help with cleaning up?” he asked, putting thoughts of labels and commitment to the back of his mind.

“I’d love some,” Maya answered.

Hana was washing the dishes when David came home. She had been thinking throughout the day about how David had changed since they had their baby. It was the army, Hana realized as she soaked a pot in bubbly warm water, that had kept David calm. It was the constant training and the sense of duty that had ordered his life. And, it was only early morning conditioning that kept David from drinking too much, the constant travelling and moving that kept him from getting bored. David left the army two years after he married Hana. He had taken up civilian life, working long hours at a local tour company, keeping the books and occasionally teaching tourists how to surf. He woke up at 6 a.m, made breakfast, went to work, came home, ate dinner with Hana, went to bed, and did the same thing the next day. When Hana asked him if he wanted to have a child, he took a moment before saying yes. Maybe he thought it would make life more exciting. Yes, he told Hana, who was gazing at her expectantly. Yes, let’s have a baby. She had jumped up and down and hugged him. He hugged her back and smiled.

Their house was not big enough for a child, they did not have enough savings for a proper, new crib, and they did not have enough time for the doctor’s visits. And yet, a year after that conversation, their healthy baby boy came into this world with ten fingers and ten toes. Hana stopped working after having the child, and David started working more, picking up graveyard shifts at a drill bit factor and setting up a cot in his office at the tour company. About a month after Hana delivered their son, he began to come home to a wife who was more corpse than person. Many nights he would unlock the front door to see Hana, sitting on the couch with their child in her arms, tears silently streaming down her face. He would come to her, take his son into his arms and put him into his crib. Then he’d come back and carry his wife to bed, just as he did the night they were married.

David’s job did not pay for mental healthcare, so he dug into his own pocket to cover the therapy bills for Hana. Postpartum depression, she told him after her first session. It goes away, she repeated to him many times that first evening. David wasn’t sure if this was for him or for her. And so, David’s days became busy and full of turmoil again, but it was in this confusion and discipline that he started to feel like the young man who had served in the Canadian military for 8 years. He worked for ten hours each day, came home and fed his baby, and then fed his wife. He drove her to therapy and changed his son’s diapers and read them both to sleep each night. When Hana’s therapy sessions dropped to only once a week, he began to take her on walks on Saturday mornings. Nature had always healed Hana, and he thought it could do the trick once more. The walks began to help, and as therapy went down to once every two weeks, then once every month.

David was a good father. Anyone would tell you that, but Hana first. He would walk around the house with his son balancing on his forearm, the child’s head held up by David’s big palms and the its feet nestled cozily in the crook of David’s elbow. He would sing to his son, would talk to his son about plants and nature on their walks as if he was 10 years old rather than 10 months old. But when Hana started to feel better, she began to pour herself into childcare. Guilt racked her mind, and after spending the first seven months of their baby’s life in therapy and laying in bed, she more than made up for it by preparing homemade baby food and dedicating herself to teaching their child how to read. She would play classical music and read him books. She no longer needed therapy or nature walks, and sometimes, this felt like she no longer needed David.

When the drill bit factory laid off David and the tour company cut his hours, it felt like no one needed him. Except, maybe, the bartender at Port Richard’s, who would give him a beer on the house at closing time. His schedule now was wake up in the morning, kiss his son on the head, apply to some jobs he wouldn’t get, have a few beers, do nothing around the house, argue with Hana, escape to Port Richard’s, and come home at night, smelling of stale beer and strong whisky.

Hana had just finished up the dishes when David stumbled in through the front door. Their son was asleep in his crib, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing in the living room.

“Where have you been, David?” she asked, as he dropped himself down onto the old living room couch. “When was the last time you spend the evening with me and our son? When was the last time you read to him?”

“Get out of my way.” David’s voice was fell flat, emotionless.

“Baby. We need to talk about this. Don’t you still love me?” Her voice broke, her last words almost swallowed by a silent sob.

David got up from the couch, pushing past her, but at the threshold of their bedroom door he turned around. “Hana, I’ll always love you. But you don’t need me anymore.”

Hana collapsed on the couch, crying. David heard his words and, for a moment, felt a rush of déjà vu. These were words Hana had uttered to him, months before, when she was going to therapy three times a week. When she had said this, he had rushed to her side, David remembered, and wiped her tears with the pads of his thumbs, whispering that he needed her. Now, he watched her cry alone on the couch. David body gave out and he crumbled onto the floor, his back sliding down the door frame, his legs straddling the living room and their bedroom. His head was spinning. He crawled over to the bathroom a few feet away and retched into the toilet. After flushing, David rested his head on the white porcelain. He could still hear Hana weeping in the other room. Unable to get up fully, he crawled the few feet over to her on his hands and knees. He rested his head on her thighs, kneeling at her feet, as if praying to her: she was the goddess on the alter and he was looking for salvation. They both stayed like that, crying alone but together.

Leaf

It had been two months since Nathan had helped Hana steal back her own bike and since then, they had begun to spend most evenings together. They cooked dinner together, they studied together, and they even went out for dinners that could be mistaken as dates by any passerby. She took him to her pottery studio and taught him, unsuccessfully, how to wheel throw. He showed her pictures of his home on Hawai’i and his favorite plants and parts of the ocean. I’ll teach you how to surf one day, he told her. And while Nathan had never been one for planning, he had started to become anxious over the undefined nature of their relationship.

Archebald’s was the nicest restaurant in town, and Nathan had told Maya to meet him there at 7pm in a nice outfit. He had picked out a light blue button down shirt and a dark blue tie, but as he fiddled with the knot he felt uncomfortable and overdressed. It was 7:15 when Maya showed up, but Nathan knew by now to expect her tardiness. She hopped out of her Lyft wearing a shin-length light pink skirt and white tank top. Nathan smiled from the corner of his mouth when he saw her: she had obviously spent that extra 15 minutes putting on some makeup because her eyelids were sparkling, and her lip gloss matched her skirt. She looked beautiful.

“I’m sorry I’m late but I swear it was the Lyft, it didn’t come on time and I had to redo my makeup a couple of times. But I tried so hard to be on time, and that has to count for something.”

Nathan just laughed. “Don’t worry, I made the reservation for 7:30.” Maya smacked Nathan’s arm upon hearing this. She got close enough to him for him to catch the faint scent of lavender and eucalyptus; he wondered if she had bought this perfume after he told her that these were his favorite scents. He breathed it in one more time: the smell felt intoxicatingly familiar.   
 “How dare you? I could have been on time.”

“Oh yeah, of course you could have.” When Maya stepped away from him and he could no longer smell her new perfume, and his mind cleared a bit.

“Well, let’s head inside and see if our table is ready. I’m starved.” Maya lead the way into the restaurant.

For dinner, Nathan and Maya ordered more tapas than they could eat and took turns sharing bites of food, talking about if they could cook the plates themselves at home. When the waiter asked if they’re interested in dessert Maya didn’t wait for Nathan to say yes, and immediately asked for one of everything. Together, they gorged themselves on dulce de leche, churros, and tres leches cake. At the end of the meal, neither could speak. Nathan reached out and held Mayas hand. Nervously, she places her hand into his and for a bit, they let their desserts digest and sit in silence, their palms in one another’s and a live quartet playing in the background.

After paying the bill, Nathan and Maya decided to walk home. The night was the kind of brisk spring night that make people remember why they moved to Washington. It wasn’t cloudy, for once, and Nathan reached out to hold Maya’s hand on their walk home. They ambled slowly, and halfway through Maya took off her heels and walks through the grassy campus commons barefoot. After a few minutes of walking, they reach first floor Maya’s apartment. Her heels are stained green with grass cuttings and her heels are slung over her shoulder, balancing in the crook of her fingers. Standing there, under the pool of light from the porch lamp, Nathan felt his heart beating harder. He tucked a strand of her curly brown hair behind her ear and placed his hand, boldly, on her waist. Nathan leaned in towards her, and lightly closed his eyes but a moment later, when he is less than a foot from Maya’s heart-shaped face, she interrupts.

“Do you want to come inside? For maybe a glass of water? I’m really thirsty.”

Nathan whipped his head back and quickly removed his hand from her waist. He ran his hands through his jet-black hair and nervously took his glasses off and cleaned them off on his shirt.

“Sure, yeah water would be good,” Nathan muttered. Maya nervously opens the door to her apartment and Nathan followed her inside. She walked over to the sink and filled up a glass for herself and one for Nathan, setting it in front of him. He chugged the glass quickly and puts it back down onto the table, a little too hard. He waited as Maya sipped her water slowly

“Are you done?” he asked, after she set down her half drank cup. Nathan tried to inject any type of enthusiasm into his voice, but it fell flat. He cringed as he heard his tone. It reminded him vaguely of his father’s tone, the one he used whenever his mom spent too long getting ready or took too long to tell a story.

Maya looked back at Nathan quizzically. “Yeah, I am. You okay?”

“I’m fine, yeah.”

Maya took the two cups to the kitchen and placed them in the sink. “So, what’s next?” she asked.

“Next?”

“Yeah. Unless you have somewhere to be?”

“Um, nowhere to be, I guess. We could watch a movie?” Nathan could feel the apathy in his voice, but no matter how hard he tried he could not inject inflections of excitement that he knew he felt beneath the self-doubt.

“If you have somewhere to be, please, be there.” Maya’s voice wasn’t rude, just matter of fact. She peered at him closely, but he averted his eyes. A moment passed, and Nathan said nothing.

“What is this?” Nathan’s voice cut the silence; it hung, fractured, Nathan’s angry voice echoing through that small kitchen as if it was a cavernous church hall.

“What do you mean?” Maya feigned ignorance.

“This. We have one month left of senior year. Are you trying to date me, fuck me, or be my friend? We’ve hung out every evening and I held your hand at dinner, and you invite me to your apartment. I just don’t understand what’s going on.”

Maya stepped back, Nathan’s pointed question drawing her eyes wide. Her mouth shaped itself into a little *o* and her brow furrowed.

“What are you saying to me? I thought you didn’t like planning ahead?” Maya looked directly at Nathan, but he didn’t meet her piercing gaze. He kept his head down as he spoke to her.

“I just don’t understand what’s going on right now. It’s like we’re going on dates. I tried to fucking kiss you outside. Did you even notice? Are you leading me on for nothing? I’m not trying to waste my time.”

Maya shook her head and walked away from Nathan to the other side of the kitchen. She stopped abruptly near the counter and steadied herself on it with her hands.

“Why are you saying any of this to me?” Maya’s voice cracked a bit. She turned and began walking towards the door. Nathan followed her, shaking his head.

“I’m just trying to get an actual read on you. There are a couple months left of school and you have a cushy job and life lined up being a boring-ass accountant. I don’t want that. So, what are we doing here, right now?”

“I didn’t realize you were trying to kiss me. I didn’t mean to lead you on, I just. I don’t know, I thought we should come inside.”

“You’re so oblivious sometimes, I swear. For someone who plans ahead, how has it not been killing you that we have no idea what this is?” Nathan motioned fanatically to the space between them, which is growing larger as Maya continues to take steps back.

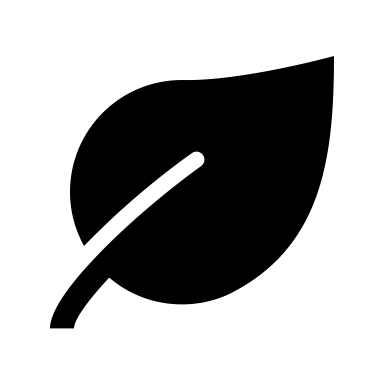
“What is going on?” Maya said, almost to herself. “You’re being such an ass. This isn’t you.”

Nathan just shook his head. “I’m just trying to understand what you want.”

“I wanted to spend time with you. But right now, I don’t want you to be here. I need some space.” Sat back down in a chair, tears threatening to spill from the corners of her eyes.

For once, Nathan did not have a response. He looked at Maya for a second and swore under his breath. He pivoted on his foot and left the kitchen, throwing his shoes on near the door. Maya stayed in the kitchen, not making eye contact with him. Nathan paused for a moment before opening the front door to leave the house. He almost turned around, but he decided against it. It was better to walk out now than to walk out when it was too late.

With that thought in his mind, he left.



They left Hilo on a Tuesday. David spent his last evening on the island walking with his son around their yard, telling him the names of trees and the uses of the herbs they were growing in their small garden. Using a small knife, David sliced a piece of the colorful bark off of the rainbow eucalyptus tree in their back yard. The piece showcased the fiery scarlet, deep purples, and stripes of green, all flowing through the warm brown bark. He put his knife back into his pocket and gave it to his son who held it tightly in his left hand and held David’s hand in his right. Walking towards their house, David positioned their son on their bamboo swing outside and let him entertain himself as he helped finish up the packing. David walked back into their home and watched as Hana taped up the last few boxes they were taking to San Diego.

“David, pass me that bag. It has all of our passports and tickets. Will you grab Nathan’s backpack too? It has activities for him to do on the plane. My parents are going to pick us up from the airport once we land so I’d really like to have all of the stuff we need for the first day in our carry-ons…” Hana’s voice blended into the background; David was no longer listening. He could not listen. Hawaii was the only home that ever felt like his: the only home that made sense to him. Listening to Hana planning their futures in the bland suburbs of southern California sounded like the most boring thing that could happen to them.

“Honey, do you think we could grow some of these plants we have here at your parents house?” David cut Hana off with this question.

She thought for a moment before she answered. “I don’t see why not. I don’t think we can travel with seeds though, so I’d rather not risk it.”

David shook his head and got up off the couch and began helping Hana tape boxes. “I still don’t understand why we aren’t giving it another month or two before giving up on the life we have here,” he muttered, mostly to himself. Hana rolled her eyes at this.

“We are not having this conversation again.”

“I just don’t see why you don’t trust me to figure out another job.”

At this, Hana stopped taping boxes. She stood up and threw her tape across the room. “Two years, David. It’s been two years since you made enough money for rent, bills, and a dime to put away for savings. Don’t you want Nathan to go to college? Don’t you want us to ever be able to retire?”

David shook his head. “You’re throwing away an amazing life we have here. We’re raising our son near the ocean and the rainforest. You can’t trade that for anything.” Hana didn’t answer. She simply walked across the room to pick up the tape she had thrown and continued sealing boxes. David didn’t say anything either. He went over to pack Nathan’s backpack and their carry-on bags. As he passed Hana on his way to the bedroom, he stopped for a moment and placed his hand on her back as she was bent over and taping a box up. She stood up and looked at him, his hand still on the small of her back. With his right hand, he tucked a strand of her hair back behind her ear. Hana smiled ever so slightly back at him, and for a moment, she felt like that girl in the tiki bar seven years ago.

Leaf

Nathan almost punched a wall when he got back to his apartment. Arjun knew better than to ask him what was wrong, so he quietly left the apartment, leaving Nathan to stew in his own stupidity. In his room, he replayed the scene in his mind, pinpointing the spot it had gone wrong. He felt like a dick. He had been harsh and rude. Maya was sweet, kind, and Nathan knew she didn’t deserve the attack he laid on her. He *liked* her. And it sounded like she liked him. Nathan had never stressed over uncertainty, but now, the uncertainty ate at his sanity like acid burning away at wood. A sinking pit of dread settled into the bottom of Nathan’s stomach as he came to the full realization of how he had left Maya’s apartment that evening. He half-heartedly picked up his phone to text Maya something, anything, to fix their situation. After a few half-typed out messages backspaced into nonexistence, Nathan sat down on the edge of his bed and tossed his phone to the other side. There was no use because there was nothing to say. Not knowing what to do, Nathan reached for his phone and typed in the only phone number he knew by heart. His mom picked up on the first ring.

“Hey honey. It’s late, what are you calling about?” His mom’s voice calmed Nathan down immediately.

“Mom, I think I really screwed up tonight.” Nathan said.

“What happened, sweetie? Do you want to talk about it?”

And so, Nathan spent the next half hour recounting the night and the past two months with Maya to his mother. She was the best listener he knew, letting him vent and cry, interjecting with comments and questions at all the right spots. After he finished explaining everything about Maya and that night, his mom was quiet for a few seconds before speaking.

“It sounds like you really like this girl. And if you do, you had better go back to her house and apologize unconditionally to her. A no-strings-attached apology. Half of love is just deciding to come back to that person every time. If you come back, you’ve already won half the battle. And if you love her, it’s worth the risk of her not loving you back.”

“I’m scared of messing it up.”

“I think you’re scared of not messing it up.” His mother, like most mothers, was irrevocably correct about things of this nature.

“What should I do?”

“I think you should go back to Maya’s house and apologize and try to talk to her about how you were feeling. You’re allowed to be overwhelmed and confused and scared, but you have to share those feelings with her.”

Nathan was silent on the phone. He reached into his wallet and pulled out a small piece of dried bark from an inner pocket. It used to be colored with streaks of green and purple, but now the bark was faded and falling apart, tucked away safely to extend its life.

“Did dad ever talk about how he felt with you?”

“Not enough. Not near the end. Before he left us, he stopped sharing those feelings with me. That’s when it was really over; before he decided to sleep on the couch, before he moved out, before the police officer told us about how he died,” she went quiet. Nathan could tell there was more she wanted to say, but simply couldn’t.

“I’m sorry to bring this back up, Mom.”

“You’re okay, honey. How are you feeling now?”

“A bit calmer. More centered, I think. Look, it’s late. I should go figure out how to fix this. I love you.”

Nathan set his cell phone down on his side table and picked up a small framed picture of his parents. It was taken on their wedding day, outside of the bar where they first met. His father was resting his back lazily on a rainbow eucalyptus tree and his arm was swung around his mother. Her white dress was dotted with specks of brown and she was looking up at her new husband. Nathan traced his finger along the thin frame of the old picture and set it down. The clock beside the photo frame read 11:58 PM. Without changing out of his button down and tie, he threw on his shoes and a raincoat and flew out the front door not bothering to lock it behind him. He began to run to Maya’s house: he had a few things he needed to tell her.