

WATERSLIDE

Neil Mathison

Mother sits on a wrought-iron bench at the Kohala Beach Club Boat Landing, monumental in her purple muumuu, hair as white as the clouds capping Mauna Kea volcano, the summit of which David can just see beyond the Pavilion Atrium. David's twins Laura and Leslie—towheads both—bob at Mother's feet while Mother bats a blue, blow-up beach ball with her cane, the cane flicking in and out from under the muumuu like a gecko lizard's tongue. The twins squeal, dive for the ball—but miss. The ball skitters into the Cabana Bar, bounces off a banyan (or pandanus is it?), rolls under a table occupied by a pair of Japanese newlyweds who are smoking cigarettes and sharing a Kohala Colada even though it's only 10 AM, plops into the canal, spins into the path of an approaching Kohala launch. The launch bell clangs. The twins wail. To the twin's delighted shrieks of joy and Mother's hand-

clapping and shouts of *Bravo, bravo*, a pretty coxswain in nautical white shorts and blue captain's hat scoops the ball out of the canal.

Mona, who is David's wife, laughs.

Ruth, who is David's sister, pauses her current diatribe, shakes her head, and pronounces with somber intonation, "What are we going to do about Mother?"

David pretends not to hear. *Is Mother Ruth's agenda this trip?*

Ruth resumes her diatribe, if diatribe it is. Maybe only Mona listens—as far as David is concerned, Ruth might be discussing AIDS vaccine, the war in the Middle East, her fifteen-year-old daughter Glenda's orthodontist treatment, a Zen koan.

Ruth is marathon-runner thin, fair-skinned, hair stylishly streaked. Diamonds glitter from her ears—her newest diamond, which is as big as a macadamia nut, from her ring finger, acquired via Lewis Hidalgo, Ruth's San-Diego-real-estate-developer fiancé who will fly in tomorrow. *You'll just love Lewis*, Ruth has separately assured Mother, David, and Mona.

As Ruth expounds, Mona frowns, smiles, laughs, raises her hands in alarm. Mona is a saint, even looks like a saint, face round, Nordic-pale, sun-

burn susceptible, nun-like (or saint-like) under a floppy Sun-Escapes protective hat, the hat a gift from Ruth. *Better than SPF 45*, she told Mona.

David can't quite hear what Ruth is saying—something about how she'd like to *get out of the resort for dinner...drive down to Kona maybe...but she has the spa appointment at five and the kids will be hungry...what the heck the Kohala restaurants here are pretty good, but not the Japanese place, where there's shellfish in everything...do you think the twins want to swim with the dolphins, she's made an appointment, two PM, but she can cancel it?*

"Heavens," Mona says, "I'm late for my pedicure."

"They have Pedi cabs here?" David jokes.

"Funny," Mona answers.

The twins are leading Mother—Grandma to them—off to the waterslides.

"I hope they'll be okay," Ruth says.

"The twins?" David asks.

"Mother," Ruth replies, flashing him her narrow-eyed, you-should-know-what-I-mean-and-don't-be-difficult look.

Later only Ruth and David are left, sitting below the bougainvillea in the Kohala Terrace Pavilion, with David sipping his fourth cup of Kona coffee and Ruth already sipping the first of the eleven Evian bottles she will consume today because *you can't re-hydrate fast enough in this sun*. A house sparrow—*manu li'i li'i* in Hawaiian (David wonders how you twist your tongue around so many “i's”)—perches on the edge of twins half-eaten pancakes, fluttering its wings in syrup. How sanitary can that be?

“Do you think Glenda is aggressive enough?” Ruth is saying. “I have to pay her to play soccer.”

“You pay her?”

“Two dollars. Every time she touches the ball.”

“What do you pay for a body check?”

Ruth is tapping a fork on the table; looking away, off to where the monorail is silently gliding to a stop. “Five dollars.”

“Aren't body checks illegal?”

“Lack of aggressiveness is a problem for Glenda. It was a problem for me.”

Ruth the Homecoming Queen. Ruth the two-sport letterwoman (and this before Title IX). Ruth with her double major in economics and drama.

Ruth—to David’s surprise—attaching herself to an NGO in Cambodia after Pol Pot. Ruth returning to Michigan for her MBA. Ruth the marketing director. Ruth the executive mother. Ruth the widow. Ruth garnering her unimaginable stock options. Ruth retired at forty-three. Can we be certain aggressiveness was lacking in Ruth?

“I wish Mother had paid me,” Ruth says.

The monorail chimes a two-note musical stop. Doors glide open. A load of khaki-panted and polo-shirt-clad conventioners disembark blinking into the Hawaiian sunlight and towing their wheeled suitcases followed by a party of elderly Japanese, the men in white shirts and black flannel pants, the women in heels, all trotting after a young woman wearing a blue beret and carrying a red flag, followed by two shirtless teenage boys in flowered surfer-jams joined by two teenage girls in thong bikinis—Peter pretends to avert his gaze. When the twins are that age will they wear swimsuits that small?

Ruth glances worriedly at her watch. “I hope Mother’s okay.”

“She’s with the twins.”

“It’s not the twins that worry me. I found her in her kitchen,” Ruth says.

“Who?”

“Mother. Girdle around her knees, squatting down, asking, *Ruth, what on earth are you doing in the bathroom?*”

“Maybe her garter snapped.”

Ruth’s lips press together.

A Ruth homily is coming. He knows the signs.

“How David-like,” she says. “Stuck in the past. Blind to the present.”

§

Having neglected to ask what swimming pool is the pool where Mother and the twins have encamped, David has, without success, cased the Kohala Pool and is now trekking the periphery of the saltwater lagoon to the Kona Pool, wearing only a pair of rubber *zori* sandals a good mile-and-a-half to go. They’re sure to cause blisters, but, given the size of his breakfast, a hike is not such a bad idea, although he is wondering how Mother made this trek with her knees so bad. Maybe she rode the monorail because David, unlike Ruth, doesn’t see the decline in Mother’s mental acuity so much as Ruth’s story about Mother’s girdle and the kitchen implies, a story which contains, in his opinion, a touch of Ruth’s drama-school histrionics.

Waves break off the lagoon entrance, file after file, each wave crest straight as a yardstick. *Life is a Wave*. Where did David see that? A bumper sticker?

In the dolphin pool no people yet, only dolphins. A dolphin races around and around and around—its gray, streamlined form rippling through the water, rippling over the sand, swimming fast, and swimming nowhere. How can a being so sleek and so graceful be so constrained?

Then David is at the Kona Pool and he can see why the children like this pool, which is as big as a real lagoon and is exactly like a lagoon might be if it were in *Treasure Island* or maybe *The Swiss Family Robinson*, with waterfalls and bridges and rock walls. David can see the twins ascending the steps to the waterslide holding Glenda's hands, one twin on either side. He sees Mother floating at the edge of the pool not far from where a waterfall drops over a hibiscus-planted cliff showering silver light into a cliff-side grotto, and then—David holds his breath—the twins streak down the slide, spiral through a corkscrew turn, splash into the pool in a blossom of spray followed by Glenda on her back, spearing the water as straight and true as if her body were shot from an archer's bow.

David waves to Mother who is floating on her back. Mother raises her hand and peers in David's direction. David calls out, "It's me, Mom." Mother hesitates until David is standing at the pool's edge only five feet away, and then she flutters her hand. "Hello dear," she says. "I didn't see it was you." Then she raises her head and looks around and slowly blinks her eyes, reminding David of the sea turtles they saw early this morning on the lava-tube scuba dive that Ruth had arranged and that David came to even though David hates scuba dives—David always expects to be eaten by a shark. *How David*, Ruth teased before they plunged over the side. *Afraid of his own shadow*.

"Have you seen the girls?" Mother asks.

David points at the waterslide where the twins, on their own now, are holding each other's hands as they climb up the steps.

"You let the girls go up there?" Mother says.

"Mother," David says. "They've already been up there. *You* let the girls go up there."

"If you say so." Mother begins to kick her feet, moving ponderously into the center of the pool, head up, keeping her hair dry. As always, at least for the past ten years, it startles David how old someone can get: Mother is a

mass of veins and loose skin and wrinkles and moles and bunions, and not, David realizes, how David pictures Mother at all when Mother isn't around. "It sure isn't the Sand Spit," Mother calls out. The Sand Spit is where Mother lives, and is where, David guesses, Mother would prefer to be on this, her eighty-sixth birthday weekend.

David's niece Glenda lies supine on a lounge chair oiling her legs and arms with suntan lotion, as sleek and smooth as the dolphins in the dolphin pool.

David pads over in his *zoris*. Glenda nods. David is fond of his niece. Until recently he has called her "Good Witch Glenda" after the good witch in the Wizard of Oz, and she has called him "Uncle Tin Man," an intimacy begun five-years ago, not long after Richard—Glenda's father and Ruth's at-the-time-estranged husband—died in a mountain-climbing accident. Recently, however, noticing Glenda's slight frown, the turning away of her head when David calls her Good Witch, David has stopped it. In general Glenda is chillier toward David than David remembers and more distant than he remembers and David feels he is in the process of losing Glenda through some alchemy about which he has no clue. Is it adolescent self-consciousness? Something David has inadvertently done or said? Or is it merely an inevita-

ble severing of ties to an older generation of uncles and aunts that precedes the severing of ties to a parent? The chilliness saddens David, a change like so many changes in life that's upon you before you're ready for it.

"How have the girls been?" he asks.

"Great." Glenda picks up a book—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. David expected something more adult, especially given Glenda's Burke-School giftedness, something by Steinbeck, or at least Dickens. All the same, he feels a sense of relief. Maybe his niece hasn't drifted as far away as he feared.

"How's Grandma."

"Clueless but happy." Glenda rolls over on her belly and unties the straps of her swimsuit top. The straps fall over the side of the chaise revealing more of Glenda's breasts than David is comfortable seeing.

"Where's Mom?" Glenda asks.

"She had to call her fiancé and, God forbid, my future step-father." Glenda says. She rests her chin on *Harry Potter*. "If Ruth doesn't call Lewis then Lewis gets pissed and nobody wants Lewis pissed. Lewis is *very* jealous."

"Jealous of who?"

Glenda shrugs. “Everybody. The pool boy. The tennis pro. It’s a *machismo* thing. The big Latin lover.”

Latin lover? What does a fifteen-year-old know about Latin lovers? David met Lewis only once, finding him like many real-estate developers pleasant if slightly pushy—David knows developers, one of his burdens as the Kitsap County Chief Traffic Engineer is to deal with developers, but Lewis’s *machismo*, if he has any, was, on the occasion David met him, well concealed. Maybe he should have looked closer. Maybe he’ll look closer this weekend. Isn’t getting-to-know-Lewis part of Ruth’s rationale for this Kohala Family Reunion?

“What does Lewis do when he’s pissed?”

“I don’t think anything physical—there’s a lot of yelling though.”

David feels a twinge of concern. “What does Ruth do?”

“Chills him out—you know—‘the deep freeze.’”

David does know “the deep freeze.” “The deep freeze” is the last and most unnerving phase of Ruth’s displeasure. No words. No interaction. Like you left the planet. Sometimes the freeze lasts a week.

“Has Mom talked to you about Grandma?” Glenda peers over *The Sorcerer’s Stone* but her green-lens sunglasses mask her eyes so that David feels like she’s speaking from behind an Emerald-City curtain.

“About what?”

“About what to do with Grandma. Lewis says it’s too big an issue to stay open.”

“What exactly does Lewis want closed?”

The twins are streaking down the waterslide again, shrieking their lungs out, catapulting into the pool, and David, as always, is holding his breath until two heads pop up above the water’s surface.

“That waterslide is *so* cool,” Glenda says.

The twins are out of the pool now and yelling for David to join them, jumping up and down, and waving. “Try it, Daddy. Try it.”

“Tin Man,” Glenda says, “you *got* to do the Slide!” Then she’s tying up her suit top and pulling David out of his lounge chair and up the waterslide steps and then all of them—Glenda, David, and the twins—are clambering up the steps, and for a moment it seems as if no time has passed at all, as if time has gone back in time to when Glenda was younger and the twins were younger, as if the pool and the waterslide are the only things in the world, as

if this moment will last forever, which is what David wants. David is surprised how far above the pool they've climbed, up the artificial, lava-rock face until he can see the coconut palms and the lagoon and the black-lava reef and the blue ocean beyond the reef. Then the pool attendant, a coconut-brown Hawaiian girl sitting in a chair under a beach umbrella and decked out in mirror sunglasses and a *Life is the Slide* T-shirt is instructing him—*Eh brah, hands on de knees*—and David is sitting at the top of the waterslide, legs stretched out before him, water cascading over his kneecaps, water flowing through his swim trunks. The slide angles sharply to one side only a few feet below him and then winds around a blind turn; David can't see the pool, can't see where he'll be going. The twins are chanting *Go Daddy, Go Daddy*, and on the third *Go* he pushes off and is accelerating faster, much faster than expected, and he whips around the blind turn leaving his stomach somewhere out over the lava reef, and then he is skewing right and left and right again until there's one last, sharp turn before he sails out into open air and into glaring silver sunlight—flying, flying above the turquoise pool—suddenly plunging into the welcoming warmth of the pool water. Then, *boom, boom*, the twins splash in beside him and *boom* Glenda splashes beside the twins and they are all four bobbing up and down together and laugh-

ing together and David has never been happier, never wanted anything more than to be with these three girls at this moment, in this pool.

How could he live without these girls?

Life is the Slide.

§

Later, at the side of the pool, David is remembering another Mother birthday party, this one sixteen years ago, at Mom and Dad's cabin, before Dad died and after Ruth and David were both married but before any of the kids are born. It's April and a north wind is blowing, the stars are just coming out, and the Olympic Mountains are a ropey tangle, black against a tangerine sky. The cabin, once a lighthouse keeper's cabin, stands at the end of a sand spit that curves in a sickle-shaped crescent almost enclosing a shallow lagoon. The cabin is painted white and trimmed green and has only a single bedroom and a steep-pitched roof and a porch just big enough for two rocking chairs. Ruth is tapping her wine glass—*I have an announcement*—her then-husband, the ever-dour Richard, grinning like a comedian who just told a bad joke. Richard uncorking a bottle of champagne, Ruth shouting *I'm pregnant!* Mother in tears. Mona in tears. Arms being thrown around Ruth. Dad is saying to nobody in particular, *Damned good genes*. Richard is spilling

champagne into everybody's plastic cups. David is suddenly so nauseous it's like being seasick at midnight on a rolling ship. Ruth's announcement sounds to David like a death knell, for the end of the time when David and Ruth and Mona and Richard and Mom and Dad have celebrated each other as adults, for a time that David has loved, and now children will replace adults, and the adults will lose one another. Even in this moment Mother is saying she *always dreamed of her grandchildren growing up on the Sand Spit just like David and Ruth did*. It's too much, too much for David. He slides his chair back, stands up, tries to escape the tiny dining room without being noticed, dragging his windbreaker from the hook near the door, but not before his gaze meets Ruth's, which is quizzical and then hurt and then angry. David steps into the night. It's been sixteen years since that evening but David's memories are as vivid as this morning's Hawaiian sunrise is vivid: the wet wind, the beach gravel rattling under his boots, the waves breaking against the spit, the cold starlight, the glow of the Seattle cityscape across the Sound. David walks the length of the spit, from its tip to the state park and back again, and as he walks he wonders why he mourns what the family celebrates, why only he feels such a terrible loss, and he wonders if it's his jealousy of Ruth, or his distaste for Ruth's grandstanding, or his anger at Ruth for

grabbing, as she always does, the center of every family stage, or if he's jealous of *losing* Ruth to her new baby, or even if it's only that, by breaking this news in front of everybody, there's no time for David to collect himself, no place for him to think things over, so that David is unmasked in front of the people he loves the most.

By the time David returns to the cabin, Ruth and Richard and Mona are packing up to catch the ferry and nobody says anything to David about his walk on the beach other than bidding each other the usual goodbyes with the usual hugs and the usual promises to get together; but later Ruth will tell David that *she was so hurt, she cried all the way back to Seattle.*

§

David jerks back to Kohala Beach Resort.

Ruth is kneeling at edge of the pool, video camera in hand. "The waterslide," she calls out. "Everybody to the waterslide."

The girls obligingly hop out of the pool.

"You too, David." Ruth's eye is glued to the viewfinder.

David hangs just below his sister's feet, at the edge of the pool. "What does Lewis want settled about Mother?"

"Who says Lewis wants anything settled about Mother?"

“Glenda.”

Ruth lowers the camera, glances over to where the girls are starting up the waterslide steps, purses her lips. “This is not a good time.”

“Why?”

Ruth bobs her head in the direction of the pool. “The girls. Mother.”

“When did you plan to pop this? An adults only tête-à-tête, just you and Lewis and me, Mother and Mona not invited?”

“I’m hearing your anger. I’m okay with your anger. But this is not a good time to talk. And Mona *is* invited.”

David pushes off.

Ruth holds the camera palm up, flashing her I-don’t-know-what-makes-you-so-difficult look. “What about the waterslide?”

“Give it a rest.”

“Party pooper.” Ruth’s tone is falsely cheery, not quite disguising her *last-one-in-is-a-rotten-egg* voice—her words stirring way-too-many specters of Ruth’s childhood challenges, Ruth’s contests, Ruth’s dares, Ruth’s double-dares, as if David’s whole life has been nothing more than trying not to be Ruth’s rotten egg.

David strokes across the pool in the direction of Mother who has settled herself on an in-pool ledge, face tipped up to the sun, like a benign, time-ancient, sea goddess.

Then David is sitting beside Mother, tipping his face to the sun too, and Mother has begun to speak as if he has been there all along. “Your daddy and I,” she says, her voice dreamy and distant, “when your daddy and I bought the Sand Spit we planned to keep it forever, until we were gone, and then we would pass it to you and Ruth and to the children too, except now Ruth has so much money she doesn’t care about the Sand Spit and she’s going to San Diego anyway—with Lewis isn’t it? Ruth won’t be even near the Sand Spit but at least you and Mona and the twins will be here and there’s kind of an eternity in that, don’t you think, after I’m gone?”

“I guess, Mom,” David says.

“I want to die on the Spit.” Mother pats his arm. “Is it time for lunch yet?”

The twins are trooping along the edge of the pool with Ruth and Glenda trooping after them, packing suntan lotion and beach towels and sunglasses and paperback books and sandals and T-shirts and inflatable sharks and cam-

eras and all the other pool-side paraphernalia the twins have dragged with them. One of the twins—is it Laura?—skitters around the end of the pool.

“Auntie Ruth says lunch is in thirty minutes but we still have time to shower.” Laura darts after Ruth and Glenda and Leslie.

“Help me,” Mother says, placing her hand on David’s shoulder. She slowly stands up and turns around with little awkward hopping steps until she is facing David and both of her hands are resting on his shoulders. “I never told the neighbors,” Mother laughs. “I dumped Daddy’s ashes in the lagoon. Help me up, dear.”

§

Later, having escorted Mother to her room, David arrives back in his own, ocean-view, six floors up, looking down at the tops of the coconut palms. The twins are in the tub. Mona has returned from her pedicure. David joins her on the balcony. “Has Ruth,” David asks, “said anything to you about Mother?”

“You mean other than about Mother losing it?” Mona lies languid in a plastic chaise, her feet on the balcony rail, still in her Sun-Escapes smock and her nun’s floppy hat, drinking what David calls one of her *frou-frou* drinks, this one as red as Mona’s new nail polish, smoking a cigarette, even though

it's a NO SMOKING floor but Mona is only an occasional smoker, *smoking only when she's happy*, she claims, which, in David's experience, is mostly true. "Passion-fruit red." Mona wiggles her toes. "You like?"

"Glenda says Lewis wants things settled. Whatever that means."

Mona sighs, blows a ring of smoke out over the balcony. "David, you're a sweet man but sometimes you're the last person in the world to see what's going on."

The ocean is the most incredible dark blue, so blue it's almost black. David is standing behind Mona, with his hands on her shoulder, and looking out over the palm tops to the black lava reef and the blue-black Pacific. If you headed straight out, where would you end up? Australia? China? David loves Mona, is lucky to have her brightening his life, and David is suddenly certain that she knows exactly what Lewis and Ruth want settled.

"Are you going to tell me? Or are you going to let Ruth lead me through another of her blind-man's-bluff manipulations?"

Ruth snubs out her cigarette. "Why can't you just talk to your sister?"

"Nobody 'just talks' to Ruth. You listen to Ruth."

"Don't kill the messenger." Mona reaches over her shoulder and takes David's hand.

“I won’t kill the messenger.”

“Ruth wants Mother in a home. Ruth wants both families to bear the expense. Equally—she’s emphatic about equally, so you have a stake in it, she says, so you won’t try to sabotage it. Lewis has suggested Mother sell the Sand Spit—Lewis has a client for the property.”

In one of the coconut palms below the balcony, a gardener is shinnying up the trunk using a lineman’s belt and hobnail boots. Another gardener is stringing black and yellow tape, like crime-scene tape, around the base of the tree. The tree gardener begins hacking dead fronds with a machete: the fronds drop suddenly, like dead bodies falling.

“You think Mother needs to be in a home?”

“Maybe.”

“And you think Mother should sell the Sand Spit?”

“I don’t know.”

The twins skitter onto the balcony, jaybird naked. “We’re hungry,” Laura says.

“Auntie Ruth says twelve-thirty sharp,” Leslie adds.

Mona is up and steering the twins back into the room. “No clothes. No lunch.”

How familiar it seems. Ruth orchestrating. Everybody knowing their parts except David. Everybody seeing what's coming except David.

Mona is back out on the balcony. "Ready to go?"

"I'm passing on lunch. Meet you at the Dolphin Pool."

"You okay?"

"Two o'clock sharp—don't keep Auntie Ruth waiting."

"Right." Mona kisses David on the cheek. Then Mona and the twins are out the door.

Gardeners are gathering the fronds from under the palms and loading them into an electric cart. The tape man is already taping off the area under an adjacent tree. Then David is out the door too, and down the elevator, and through the Pavilion Court following the paved path that leads from the Kohala Pool to the saltwater lagoon. He reaches the end of the pavement where the path changes to cinder and pumice and where the grass and the pandanus and the bougainvillea give way to lava—ragged *a'a* lava like broken glass and; smoother, sheeny *pahoehoe* lava, which reminds David of bread dough rising in a bowl—he climbs down over the lava, which is sharp enough that he can feel it through his rubber *zoris*. He passes a sign that reads KAPU – DANGER

– BIG WAVES. PROCEED AT OWN RISK, and then he is walking on coral sand and wading in glass-clear water.

Hasn't David already made up his mind? He already knows he won't let Mother move before Mother is ready to move. He is already resolved to not sell the Spit. He already believes, just as Mother believes, that the Spit *does* offer a kind of immortality—maybe immortality for all of them—as long as grandchildren and children's grandchildren still visit, digging in the gravel, skipping rocks, watching the sun set behind the Olympics. He already knows this without speaking to Ruth.

A white Chinese bridge arches over the lagoon entrance. On the shore side is the inner lagoon with its raked-sand beaches and its lounge chairs and its paddle boats and its plastic kayaks. On the ocean side, an outer lagoon embraces the Pacific between two black-lava reefs that open to the waves like a hula dancer's arms.

Life is a wave. It was a bumper sticker—David remembers it now—on a taxi at the Kona Airport.

Boogie borders bob beyond the break, rising on the swells and dropping out of sight as each wave steepens.

David imagines waves in long, repeating files, rolling across the Pacific, rising and falling, one wave after another, like days of a week follow one another, with little to tell one day apart from another, until something gets in the way, until the wave breasts an island like this one, and then the wave transforms—like a secret unveiled or a resolution made clear transforms into something unexpected—the wave changing shape and consequence, darkening below its curl, thinning at its waist until the it glows with turquoise translucence, and then it falls, it falls over on its own face, breaking left to right, racing left to right, foam and spray pluming its crown, until, in a final, thundering collapse, the wave crashes against the lava rock, rushes into the lagoon, reaching almost to the bridge where the wave vanishes into the peace of the lagoon.

Life is a Wave.

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