

Home Sweet Hawai'i

by Stephanie Han

I grew up far from the tropical paradise of Hawai'i, my mother's ancestral home. My childhood was spent in places like Iowa, Tennessee, and Massachusetts. Hawai'i, which we called "the Rock", was our summer vacation destination. I was not a local, a *kamaaina*, but as the daughter of a woman who had great pride in her home state, I was shown Island life, and in turn, my sisters and I embraced Hawai'i's beauty and cultural heritage and claimed it as part of our own. Home, as I came to realize, is not necessarily the physical location of your family's abode, but the place that holds your heart and your happiest memories.

As a child, I moved many times before graduating from high school. My Uncle Howard and Auntie Shirley's house on Poola Street remains the only place I can remember walking in and out of since I was three years old. Even now, when entering through the back door, I only have to feel the tile on my feet, see the kitchen table, and I'm instantly transported back to when I was 6, 10, 12, or 19 years old... The trade winds coming through the windows to caress my face also dry the hanging laundry. I watch my Auntie flip her playing cards during a game of solitaire, and I smile when I see the basket of fruit filled with papaya and mango. All of this reminds me that I am home.

Grandma's 70th birthday *luau* brought the entire extended family to the Islands. At the Honolulu airport, I was greeted with *leis* by my relatives. The fragrance of the flowers filled the air, and I felt my knees turn to jelly – which happens without fail whenever I return to Hawai'i. I recall swinging from banyan trees, eating sour sap from Auntie Marie's yard, sewing *leis* with my mother, devouring plate lunches on the beach, and sitting on my Uncle Howard's prickly green velvet lawn. Unlike my cousins, I was always "the Mainland girl" with no native lilt to my speech, and, upon arrival, pallid compared to my brown skinned relatives. Within a week, though, I was brown from the sun, running in my brand-new slippers, and begging one of the adults to take me for a late-night trip to Leonard's 24 hour bakery for some hot malasadas, my mouth watering at the thought of the sugary puffs of dough.

My priorities consisted of which flavor of shaved ice to order and which beach to go to. When vacation ended, I flew home, eager to see my beloved dog Nanny, but sad to leave my cousins and the sweetness of the ocean air. I compose my first poem about Hawai'i at the age of 8. It went: *Hawai'i is a nice place/with a gentle breeze and smiley face/Everyone loves Hawai'i you see/because fishes live down deep in the sea.*

I sent the poem to Grandma, who placed it in a photo album she gave me years later. Grandma, the matriarch, remained the steady figure and focus of the family's visits to Hawai'i. She ruled the clan imperiously, with her finger pointed in the air, her decisions were obeyed without dissent, and her opinions always held sway.

Like most local families, my family was a mix; *haole* (Caucasian), *pake* (Chinese), and Korean relatives made the cousins of my generation a combination of three ethnicities. Grandma's speech had the markings of the local, but she could just as easily slip into the Korean language of her parents, usually when we went to the Korean Christian church on Sundays.

I love listening to Grandma describe her life in the Hawai'i that existed before statehood. She saw the funeral procession of Princess Lili'uokalani as a child, and was the actual "Voice of Korea" announcer on the radio. Although she was at one point a beautician, Hawai'i's first Korean restaurant proprietor, and a flutist good enough to be asked to join the Honolulu Symphony, Grandma became a nurse. After the hospital's late night shift, she and the other nurses swam in Hanauma Bay. I tried to picture my gray-

haired Grandma splashing in the water with her friends, looking like she did in her old black-and-white photo album. I listened enraptured, flipping through the pictures and carefully studying the images. The same tight braids that pulled on my scalp as a child were the ones that Mom and the aunts endured while growing up on the plantation in Kunia. Most curious of all was the picture of the grandfather I never met, and who died when Mom was a teenager.

Hawai'i instilled within me a sense of belonging that I was unable to find in the stateside towns where I was often the only Asian child in my school. In Honolulu, I watched Japanese cartoons on Grandma's TV, ate Korean *kimchi* hotdogs, and learn to play Hawaiian hula songs on my guitar, all the while devouring with great interest her collection of Reader's Digest magazines. Grandma would run a brush through my long tangled hair, and I would play with her gold ring and stare with curiosity at the glass that I knew held her front teeth at night. I picked sweet and delicious *lilikoi* (passionfruit) from Grandma's backyard, and proudly wore my muumuu with the *puka* shell necklace that one of Grandma's employees gave me. Grandma worked as the director of the Korean Care Home for Senior Citizens until she was 80 years old and referred to the residents, many younger than she as "the old people." Some of my happiest memories are of those days spent running around on the little sidewalk paths pass the residents. I played tag with Annie, the winner of the Honolulu senior citizen hula hoop contest, a sprightly woman in her 70s who once presented my sisters and me with a box of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, thus sealing our devotion to her.

As they grew older, my visits to Hawai'i reflected my search for independence and identity, often apart from my tightly knit family. First came the issue of crossing the street. I voiced my complaint to Mom, expecting sympathy and instead was greeted with loud laughter when I told her I did not want to walk next to Grandma while crossing the street, "She grabs my wrist really hard and her nails hurt," I protested. "I'm too big to hold Grandma's hand. She can hold Kathy's hand!" I was 11. My sister Kathy, at 5, oblivious to it all, was stuck crossing the street with Grandma while I ran on ahead. The days of cramming 10 grandchildren into Grandma's Ford Pinto were over. Relatives went to the Mainland for school and work. Grandma retired from the senior citizens home and left her little cottage for a condominium on Alexander Street.

Our last family gathering was for Grandma's 90th birthday. It was the first reunion in 20 years attended by every single family member. By now, Grandma was living with Uncle and Auntie on Poola Street. On my way to Korea for a year, I stayed an extra day and witnessed her muffled cries and hugs when it was time for goodbyes. Hawai'i seemed different. There was something missing in the gathering that my cousin Holly noticed. "New blood," she said matter-of-factly. "This family needs new blood." We – my cousins and sisters and I – had all grown up. The course of Hawai'i in my ears was that of my past childhood.

I came back through Hawai'i a year later, after my stay in Korea, where I explored my father's roots and got to know his family. I wept on the plane leaving Seoul, but my heart lifted when I landed in Honolulu. I was coming home. I let the sun freckle my face and looked out at the water on the beach at Waimanalo. I drove out to the Pali and sighed when I looked out over the verdant landscape and felt my hair whip around from the strong wind, remembering my first trip there 20 years before.

I saw Grandma a few months ago. When we said goodbye Grandma cried, and I return home to Los Angeles my heart sad and heavy. When my boyfriend met me at the airport I knew I need not look any further for my happiness. Rather spontaneously in our excitement to see each other, we decided to act on what we always knew was an inevitability. We made plans to marry, and to marry in Hawai'i. Naturally the first person I called with the news was Grandma. She laughed with delight and congratulated me. It was this last trip that convinced me that my idle daydreams would come true – I would live with someone

I love in this exotic locale. I know now with absolute certainty and happiness that Hawai'i will always be a part of my life and that even more significantly I will most likely settle there when I have a family of my own.

Hawai'i reassures me of my place in life, of the love of my family, and of the simplicity and beauty of nature – beautiful blue waters, brilliant sun, and the vibrancy of its people. I know that my children will experience Hawai'i just as I did as a child. They will smell the same some areas and catch the waves on a sandy beach, and stand in the liquid sunshine when it falls from the clouds. Knowing that my memories will be relived by another fills me with anticipation and excitement. I see time fast-forward and wonder about the generations to follow. And I know that the magic of the place call Hawai'i will outlive us all.

(Hemispheres, 1999)