

FORGETTING ENGLISH



Stories

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WINNER OF THE 2007
SPOKANE PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION

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FIRST SUNDAY

Moa

He lives in his mother's house, with no electricity or hot water, yet somehow he always has a ready supply of condoms. The notion strikes me one night as he rolls away from me and gets out of bed. He stands in the shadows of Cheryl's bedroom, a stripe of yellow light coming through from the kitchen (my sister is fortunate enough to have electricity, though she doesn't have hot water). As the kitchen light dapples the muscles of his bare chest, I make a mental note to change the sheets before Cheryl comes home.

He looks down at me. We've learned very little about each other, and while that should have changed things between us, it hasn't. He is engaged to a woman from his village, he told me last night, but they haven't slept together and won't until the first Sunday after they are married. I told him it didn't matter. He asked if I had a *moa* back home, a boyfriend, and I said yes. I lied. I wanted things to feel equal between us.

And in a way, things do feel that way, as much as they aren't. Sione is twenty-three, and the thirteen years between us makes me feel old under my pale, lived-in skin, the highlights in my hair covering its early gray. Sione's brown, hairless body is as smooth as heated caramel, and his short black hair is thick between my fingers.

The language barrier, I think, helps more than hinders. A couple of times I've practiced my newly acquired Tongan words on him, but he prefers to speak to me in English, as if to keep a distance between us.

"*Pou'li ā*, Sione," I say as he leans down to kiss me good-bye.

"Good night, Melanie," he answers, smiling. I smile back, not minding that he doesn't call me Mel, like everyone else. I like the softness of

my name in his mouth. I watch the width of his body fill Cheryl's small doorway, then hear the nearly noiseless sound of his feet on the dirt road, on the way back to his mother's house.

Uma

Cheryl said she would be gone a week. It surprised me that she left right away, even though I knew my visit was sudden, unexpected, perhaps not entirely welcome. The day after I arrived, I woke alone under the leaky roof of her house. She left me fresh water and some food in the icebox, and she apparently left me in charge of a trio of mangy cats and the red pig that lives in her yard.

It's been four years since I've seen my sister, and the first thing she did when she saw me at Nuku'alofoa's open-air airport was sniff my hair, or maybe it was the back of my neck. She leaned in, first to one side, then the other, inhaled, then stood back, holding my arms as a breeze swirled around us. Her wide brown eyes crumpled as they always did when she smiled, but when her skin stretched taut against the fine bones of her face I noticed how skinny she'd become. As she once told me, it wasn't easy to be a vegan living in a kingdom of pork.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, miming her greeting.

"*Uma fe'iloaki*," she said. "It's how Tongans greet their loved ones."

I followed her out to the truck she had borrowed from a neighbor in her village. "This is going to sound terrible," she said as we climbed in, "but I have to go to Ha'apai tomorrow. Just for a couple of days. There's a new volunteer who needs some help getting her program off the ground."

"You got out of the Peace Corps years ago," I said. "Can't someone else do it?"

"I don't mind," she said, which was typical. Cheryl never could refuse help to anyone, even at her own expense. "Besides," she added, "it'll give you a chance to rest and get over the jet lag."

The last time I saw Cheryl was Christmas, four years ago, at our parents' house in Connecticut. She was about a year into her Peace Corps contract, and she'd been in Hawai'i, on medical leave for a root canal. As a Christmas present, we flew her home for the holidays, but it wasn't a gift she wanted. She seemed to have forgotten where she

came from; she muttered to herself in Tongan and ate with her fingers until she caught one of us giving her a look. Later, when she told us she wasn't coming back, I thought of Bligh's crew, the ones who'd "gone native," and I half expected to find her with piercings and tattoos, with grass skirts and a Tongan husband.

But she lives alone in a squat green house, with a leaky roof and an outhouse. She wears wraparound cotton skirts and T-shirts. She doesn't look much different; the lines in her face show the effects of the sun more than her thirty-eight years. When I called after all this time and announced my visit, she didn't flinch—same old Cheryl: open arms, no questions asked—and for that I was grateful. Still, something is different, something unseen. The night I arrived, as we sat on the wooden benches in her dim living room, I looked at her and couldn't think of a thing to say.

Palangi

I met Sione my first day here, on my way into town. Cheryl had drawn me a map and left me her bike. I hadn't gone far when I heard dogs barking, which I ignored until they drew closer. When I glanced back, I saw a pack of four lean, angry dogs lunging at the pedals, targeting my feet. I shouted and kicked at them, unaware that I was weaving my bike into the road. The sound of a car horn filled my ears, and a truck skimmed past, narrowly missing my rear wheel. The driver pulled over, a young Tongan guy, and he got out and clapped his hands and yelled at the dogs: "'*Alu mama'o!*" He made a funny noise: *chhuut*. The dogs took off, running, headed back to wherever they came from.

I dismounted, my legs shaking, and he smiled. "You're Cheryl's sister," he said, his English heavily accented.

"How'd you know that?" Then I recognized the truck—the same one Cheryl borrowed to pick me up at the airport. "You must be her neighbor," I said.

"*Io,*" he said, nodding. "Where are you going? You want a ride to town?"

He lifted my bike into the back of the truck, then got in. I hopped in on the passenger's side, and, with a jerk, we were back on the road. I snuck a glance at him. His lips curved upward as he turned dark eyes on

mine, as if he felt my gaze. Dust floated in through the open windows, coating my eyes and tongue.

He dropped me off at the market, and I offered to cook for him that evening, to thank him. He demurred at first but finally agreed. As I walked the narrow aisles of the cramped grocery, I reminded myself that I wasn't in New York, that this was not my normal life. Usually when I invite a man over for dinner, it's somewhere around our third date, give or take, and he always stays for breakfast. I wasn't thinking this way when I invited Sione, but as I picked up fruits and vegetables, I remembered his broad shoulders, smooth brown skin, inky black hair. I decided not to rule anything out.

He ended up leaving just before dawn, as a hint of light edged into the sky. Men, I thought, are no different, even in the farthest corners of the world.

But I've offered to cook for him again tonight, our last night together having Cheryl's house to ourselves. I can tell he doesn't like my cooking—and I can't blame him—but I feel it's a necessary pretense, something that softens the fact that he's coming over for sex.

In Cheryl's kitchen, I find some spices, an onion, and three mushy cloves of garlic. I still have some noodles and vegetables. I'm not a committed vegan, like Cheryl—I used to love to tease her by ordering steak or pork whenever we ate together—but I couldn't bring myself to buy the strange, unfamiliar meats I saw in the grocery. I did buy a very expensive Diet Coke and a bag of Twisties, so if my stir-fry doesn't turn out, Sione and I can eat those. Unless we skip eating altogether.

I return to the living room and pick up Cheryl's Tongan dictionary. I look up a few key words—hello, goodbye, bathroom—then the word for foreigner: *palangi*. I repeat it to myself several times. That's what I am now, a *palangi*.

I remember what Cheryl told me when she first joined the Peace Corps. They'd given her three locations to choose from, and she chose Tonga, she said, because it was the only place she hadn't heard of. She had to look it up on a map to be sure it existed.

I look around, as if for clues that would make her less of a stranger. But her house is empty, except for the animals and her few spindly pieces of furniture. She's always lived sparsely because she likes to be mobile. She doesn't believe in getting good at one thing and taking

herself to the top; she sees jobs and homes as projects, as things she'll finish and then move on. Here, she has no job anymore; she lives off her garden of vegetables and off occasional tasks she can do for money or supplies. And this dim, stuffy little house has been home for twice the time she usually spends in any one place.

'Ulungāanga kovi

Sione and I eat as we did our first night together, in Cheryl's living room with our plates on our laps. Though his English is good, he is quiet, sometimes leaving me unsure of how much he understands. We drink whiskey from chipped ceramic cups, and he tells me about working in the bush, reaping harvests of *mānioke* and 'u*fi*, the root vegetables that grow from his family's soil. To make extra money, he does odd jobs around the village. I find this incredibly sexy. I can't remember the last time I went out with a man who could do more than change a light bulb.

"And you?" he asks.

"I'm the director of marketing for the US division of a Chinese electronics company." The present tense rolls off my tongue so easily it almost makes me forget what happened. I still like the way it sounds, the confidence with which I say it. "I'm sort of taking some time off."

"Holiday?"

"It's a long story," I say. He has only picked at his food. I take our plates and put them in the sink. He follows with the cups, and in the cramped kitchen, he's very close. I put my hands on his shoulders, then outline his arms with my fingers, down to the wrists. "Thanks for coming tonight," I say. Then I lift my face to his.

He looks at me, his lips in their usual half smile, then bends his head to mine. As we kiss, I slip my arms around his neck, and he pulls me closer. I lead him to Cheryl's bedroom. He is like a teenager, infinitely passionate, only with more staying power. Every square inch of my body responds to him, and, tonight, I find myself wondering about his fiancée, my curiosity evolving into envy. Perhaps I could stay here, I'm thinking, start my own business and continue meeting Sione on the sly.

Later, when he falls asleep, I prop my head on my hand and look down at him. His long dark eyelashes rest on a wide cheek still plump

with youth and with some sort of innocence, though certainly not inexperience.

When he wakes, he smiles his crooked smile and sits up. “You’re not like your sister,” he says.

I laugh. “That’s the truth.” Though Cheryl and I are only two years apart, we have never been anything alike. Always a sensitive kid, Cheryl nursed sick animals, wore her hair long and curly, and allowed so many stray cats on her bed that she barely had room to sleep. I possessed none of her dreaminess; I’d snipped my name from Melanie to Mel at the age of eight, wore my hair efficiently short, and was networking by the time I was in junior high. Cheryl had remained a virgin until college, until she fell in love; I’d done it at fourteen with a childhood friend to get it over with. And from there, we’d lived out our lives as one would expect: she became a social worker and eventually drifted out here, and I worked my way up the ladder of a global corporation. We’ve never shown much consideration for each other’s work, and it amazes me even now, as I watch Sione pull on his clothes, that I’ve found something in Cheryl’s environment to appreciate.

He dresses quickly. “What’s your hurry?” I ask. He leans down, kisses my ear. “Car,” he says. I don’t hear anything, except the slap of the door as it closes behind him.

Yet a few minutes later, I hear the rumble of an engine, and then the door opens again. I grab Cheryl’s robe, hoping Sione has come back.

But it’s Cheryl in the living room. “Hi,” she says. She leafs through the mail I picked up for her in town. “Was that Sione I just saw leaving?”

“Yes. You’re back early.”

“It went more smoothly than I thought,” she says. “Was he here to see me?”

“Not exactly.”

Then she notices I’m wearing her robe. “Did you let him in dressed like that?”

“No,” I say, “I put it on after he left.”

She puts her mail down. “What? Don’t tell me you—”

“Well, you left me here with nothing to do,” I say, “and I needed *something* to occupy my time. Sorry about your sheets—I’ll wash them tomorrow.”

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