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Behind a Corner Window
Linked Short Stories

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Anne Marie Silva

December 2014

Thesis Committee:

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The Thesis of Anne Marie Silva is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Synopsis of linked short stories

It was 1948 and Manuel Souza was 15 years old when he left his family and the comfort of his village on Pico Island in the Portuguese Azores. With barely an eighth-grade education, Manuel arrived in the U.S., scared and unable to speak English. And when he did say the few words he knew, it was with a stutter so bad he wasn't understood. He stumbled through the hollow, dreary halls of Ellis Island, where he stood in the lice and inspection lines, facing the scowls of arrogant immigration officers. It was there that one officer told him, "*You'll never be rich, but your children someday might be.*"

With that hope, from Ellis Island to California, Manuel had a job waiting for him in the commercial tuna fishing industry (think Star-Kist canned tuna). But in those days there was an immigration quota on "Portagees," so, at the tender age of 15, his wealthy uncle (pioneer of the purse seine tuna fishing net) paid a woman in her sixties to "marry" Manuel Souza on paper so he could legally stay in the U.S.

Maria Elena lived in the small farming community of San Pablo in the San Francisco Bay area. She was a first-generation Portuguese American who didn't speak English when she went to kindergarten because her mother and grandparents didn't know English. She did well in school and dreamt of becoming a famous opera singer and moving to San Francisco, leaving the smell of linquica and cod behind forever.

But as life often does, Maria Elena's plans took a U-Turn. Instead of moving to San Francisco for her spot at The Music Conservatory, she met Manuel Souza, an uneducated tuna fisherman from Pico. They eloped and moved to San Diego, a city Maria Elena always said was a "sleepy, Navy town with absolutely *no* culture."

This union produced two children: Vic and Ellie. Born in the tumultuous sixties, Ellie soon loathed her stifling cultural family expectations and her Right-Wing Republican pill-addicted mother. She also was humiliated and emotionally abused by her alcoholic, distant father. The way she coped was by writing, including *Ridercella* – a feminist take on Cinderella much to the delight of her liberal elementary school teachers.

Manuel often deserted his wife and children, travelling around the world, taking mistresses from the Solomon Islands to Panama and everywhere in between. One mistress in particular was interesting to Ellie – the granddaughter of Haile Selassie, once emperor of Ethiopia who her father met on Saipan. Manuel's disappointment with the "American Dream" brought him to more High Balls than his liver could withstand; the mainstay of the fishing industry. His daughter Ellie's journey also included getting high and drunk and trying to find solace in bed with many emotionally distant men. Mary Elena's ending comes at 65 from too many pain killers and a broken heart.

A turning point in the stories comes when Ellie finds sobriety as Manuel drinks himself to death. And it is only when Ellie agrees to bring her father's body back to Samoa for burial – the place where he ended up living for 25 years with his new wife and children – that Ellie is able to bury her resentments, guilt and shame in its volcanic soil. She finally appreciates Manuel and Maria Elena's journeys -- as well as her own.

Behind A Corner Window is my working title of short stories based on my colorful, crazy, funny, addicted, nomadic Portuguese and Samoan family and friends. It is also based on my story.

I've been writing since I was five years old. My writing has included short stories, plays, poems, obits, ad copy, hard news, travel and feature articles, rebellious manifestos, letters to Congress and other pieces. I've studied child development, journalism and creative writing and writing for the performing arts and have worked as a pre-school teacher, in fast food (Picnic 'N Chicken where I lasted one day), in public relations, advertising, publishing (the exciting world of yellow page directories!) and every odd, soul-sucking job in between.

I currently work as a media and employee communications manager for a large natural gas company and as a reporter for the *Portuguese American Journal* and as part of the *Kale Soup for the Soul* literary reading series. My piece about my father is going to be featured in the *Immigrant Stories* anthology by Portuguese Heritage Publications. Also, my play *Fish Tales* had three staged readings and was selected for the *San Diego Playwriting Festival*. I've also won *Editor's and Agents Choice* for a short story at the SDSU Writing Conference and did the research and wrote the information plaques for the *Tribute to Cannery Workers* public art project with the Port of San Diego. My poems have been featured in *San Diego Poet's Anthology*, *Willing Suspension of Disbelief* and other publications and I was a finalist for *Chicken Soup for the Volunteer's Soul*.

I've lived in San Diego, Hawaii and now Los Angeles and have visited family in Samoa and Portugal regularly. In my spare time, I serve on the Leadership Council of the

Fulfillment Fund to help underserved, at-risk youth find a path to attend college, am on United Way's Advisory Council for HomeWalk to help Los Angeles' Homeless and volunteer with the Downtown Women's Center in Los Angeles' Skid Row.

Behind a Corner Window

Short Stories

By Anne Silva

All the Marias

They were all named Maria.

Maria de Fatima. Maria Theresa. Maria Isabella. Maria Consesau.

Maria Elena born in San Pablo, California in 1939. Maria Elena's father and mother had only been married a month before when little Maria Elena was born. It was quite the scandal in those days.

True to her beginnings, Maria Elena was no ordinary *Maria*. She took opera lessons and wanted to go to college. She wanted to live in San Francisco – or as they all referred to it – The City. It was as magical as the Land of Oz that little Judy Garland was traveling to with that scarecrow, lion and Toto – one of Maria Elena's favorite movies.

“*Ah Maria, abrir a janela,*” her mother would tell her while frying cod in their Santa Maria kitchen. The young Maria Elena was so absorbed in reading about Rita Hayworth and Jayne Mansfield that she didn't hear her mother.

“Ahhh, how come you no open the window,” her old Tio Joao would get up from his nap, slap her with the newspaper that had been spread across his face. He was closer to the window and could have easily opened it. Yet he took the extra steps to go slap her.

Maria Elena sighed and opened the window.

“How come you no listen to your *mae* never?” Tio Joao scolded her.

Maria Elena was held captive in this fish-smelling household. Her mother woke her every day at six with her rapid sweeping. She wore an apron around her dark blue sleeveless dress, her arms like two sun burnt sausages moving in motion with the broom.

Her mother wore nylons and orthopedic brown shoes and was stout and barely five-feet with bushy black eyebrows, a slight moustache and grey streaked black hair pulled back in an old lady bun. She always smelled of vanilla, rose water and old grease.

Maria Elena's mother fried bacon and then eggs in the same bacon fat, spread butter on toast, poured coffee while her father, still drunk from the night before, snored loudly in bed.

Maria Elena hated the sound of that broom. It meant waking from her dreams and facing a day of chores in the stifling San Pablo heat. Every day was another pile of laundry to help fold, more eggs to collect from the warm butts of chickens, more clothes to mend, more rosaries to pray, more tables to set.

Her father, Tio Joao and all the other men, uncles, cousins, men from the neighborhood, would sit in their patio, rolling their homemade cigarettes, drinking their homemade red wine, laughing their hoarse, half-drunken laughs. In her father's case, he would drink so much the men would have to carry him to his bed each night. Maria Elena rarely saw him or talked to him.

She remembered a time when she was a little girl and he gave her a gold bracelet. She wore it with pride. But one day at school, she noticed it was gone. For years she wore sweaters, even in the blistering heat, to cover the spot on her wrist where her father might have noticed it missing. He was either doing cartwheels in the fields or raising his hands to she and her mother. There was no in between with his drunken state.

More and more he was in bed, snoring or on the porch looking hopelessly sad. But some days he'd laugh with the other men, drinking their homemade grape wine that stained the table clothes and their teeth.

The women gossiped, laughed and sweat in the tiny house while they made sweets: *pao duce*, *malassadas* and fried more cod in mid-July heat.

“Ay Jesus, look at you *mi filha*,” the men would leer at Maria Elena.

She was sixteen, tall and lanky, with barely budding breasts. She wore her hair like Rita Hayworth and refused to wear an apron but wore crisp white blouses and fashionable pedal pushers instead. She carefully applied bright red lipstick, but it wasn't for the men – it was to look like Rita. She ignored their comments too lusty for her age.

Maria Elena wanted to know the latest styles they were wearing in San Francisco – where she was going when she graduated early from high school at 17. She and her best friend Irma had it all planned out. They were going to The Williams School and work downtown in a big law firm in a secretarial pool. They'd wear shoulder pads and big pearl earrings and necklaces; dine at the Wharf in satin gloves. And on the weekends, Maria Elena would study opera at Madame Minerva's Conservatory, fulfilling her dream to be the next Maria Callas.

It was one thing the family all agreed upon: Maria Elena had the voice of *anjo* like *Nossa Senhora de Fátima* that had appeared to the three children.

Maria Elena always liked that story about the Virgin Mary appearing to the three children, Lucio Santos and her cousins, Jacinta and Francisco Marto and the secrets she imparted on them.

It was in 1916 that the three children who were herding sheep proclaimed that an angel visited them on numerous occasions. The Blessed Virgin had supposedly come to tell them that she had been sent by God with a message for every man, woman and child. She promised that Heaven would grant peace to all the world if her requests for prayer, reparation and consecration were heard and obeyed.

Maria Elena wanted her own miracle too – a life of fame and fortune away from the constraints of being born a Portuguese girl who was expected to marry and have children like a cow.

Maria Elena had other ideas.

She once auditioned for Madame Minerva– right there at Mr. Braga’s store on Main Street. Mr. Braga had excitedly called her mother to bring Maria Elena to meet this famous purveyor of voices. Madame Minerva was visiting her cousin Alice and quite the talk of the town. And Maria Helena could sing *Ave Maria* at Our Lady of the Angels better than anyone, even at ten.

The nice lady with the pearls and the blonde wig smiled patiently as Maria Elena, dressed in a form-fitting polka dot dress and black pumps sang the scales for her while Mrs. Braga played piano. She sang *Ave Maria* as well as a popular Fado song and Mrs. Braga had to stop playing the piano for a moment and blow her nose.

“Well dear, you have plenty or promise,” Madame Minerva told her, handing her a card from a perfect white glove.

“Call me when you’re in The City.”

Maria Elena didn’t know what to say.

Mrs. Braga smiled and Mr. Braga said, “Ai Jesus,” while Madame Minerva left the shop.

But the dream was quickly fading, at least on most days around the house.

Maria Elena was sweating in her cotton nightgown from the stifling heat, dreaming of singing with Maria Callas. But her mother’s frantic sweeping pushed her into the dullness of the day. The day filled with homemade wine, cigarettes, linquica and laughter. Maria Elena was so used to it now that it felt as interesting and routine as pulling on the teat of her cow Bessy in the field.

Today was different though. Maria Elena’s cousins Benny and Linda would come over from Modesto and there would be checkers and fried chicken and laughing and driving around in Benny’s Chevy to stop at Zillerman’s for iced Cokes. They’d take a picnic lunch and go to Lake Holly to laugh and sit in the sun. If they wanted to be daring, they might even take a few puffs off of Benny’s cigarettes. Tomorrow was the *fiesta* and there would be plenty to do for the parade and party. But today they could have fun.

Maria Elena sat in a chair on her front porch. She was dressed in yellow pedal pushers, white sandals, a white sleeveless blouse and a festive red scarf around her neck. Linda was wearing a bright red summer dress, much to the horror of the *tias* who sat on the other side of the porch, whispered, stared and pointed at her. Linda stuck her tongue out at the lot of them. Both teenagers had on bright red lipstick, their thick dark hair in up-dos reminiscent of Rita and Ava. The *fiesta* parade was coming down Main Street, in

front of Maria Elena's small yellow house. She saw it year after year, but her visiting cousins always made it bearable.

Rows of young and old marched from Our Lady of the Angels past their home to the San Pablo *Sociedade do Espirito Santo* Hall to have *sopas* after the parade. Maria Elena and Linda tried to avoid the hall at all costs. People stood in front of her porch to watch the parade, their fat butts in their Sunday best that blocked the girls' views. They sat on their fence and tried to get a better view.

Linda laughed and took a swig of her bottled coke.

A small band marched by and played a terrible rendition of a traditional Portuguese song. Children and teenagers walked by in long, colorful velvet gowns and black tuxedos.

All the *tias* were assembled on Maria Elena's porch and they, along with old Tio Joao, watched and waved at people – most of them relatives - in the parade. Women held babies and older people sat on dining room chairs in the dusty road. A teenage girl wore a long purple gown and a crown and walked by. She tightly held the arm of a boy in a tuxedo. The girl blushed and waved to the crowd. The infant Jesus was hoisted on the shoulders of men who carried a four-year-old boy who was attached to the wire frame underneath his ornate cloak, head bobbing in sleepiness. There they were, princesses, kings, queens, and their courts, from as far away as Artesia, in all their velvet glory.

Maria Elena hadn't seen her father since early morning when the old men went to the Hall to move the tables for the feast. She imagined he was with Norberto Frietas

doing more drinking than moving anything. She knew she wouldn't see him for a few days and there would be whispers and stares at her and her mother when they went to Perry's Market the next day.

"Don't pay them no attention they no think your *pae* is good enough for them," her mother would say as they pushed their grocery cart home.

"But mom, he's always drunk."

Her mother let go of the handle of the cart and slapped her hard across the face, then went back to continue moving the cart.

"Ai Maria, your *pae* is a good man, when he no drunk."

Maria Elena was smart enough to keep walking, holding the back of the cart up so it could travel with its missing wheel.

She looked at her mom, walking with determination, her huge Portuguese butt trailing behind her, slow to catch up to her feet. In spite of just being slapped, and it wasn't very hard and she guessed just for show, Maria Elena smiled. At least she was made of strong stock on her mother's side.

Maria Elena yawned and rolled her eyes at Linda. She would never have dreamt that in 25 years her own daughter would be a princess at another *festa* in San Diego.

She sat on the front yard fence, drank her cool coke and told Linda about her plans.

“I can’t wait until I never see another parade again,” she said above the din of another band and the Portuguese dancers that twirled in front of them in their costumes of red, white, green and black.

“Yeah, well what does your *mae* think about all of that?” Linda asked, and smiled sarcastically while she lifted her bottle to her mom and the other *tias*.

Maria Elena’s mother gave them a dismissive wave from her distance.

“Why you two girls no in the parade, you too good to celebrate Isabella?” Tio Joao scolded them from his perch.

The three other old men sitting there looked at them too, waiting for an answer. There were ten chairs lined up on Maria Elena’s small porch with each inhabitant transfixed on the parade but talking all at once. No one seemed to be listening to each other.

The *Festa do Espírito Santo*, took place – and still does - every year where two or more Portuguese people are gathered together.

“It’s a little like that saying in the Bible about ‘two or more gathered,’” Linda joked. “Although these *velho gente* are more interested in gossiping than anything else.”

When she was little, Maria Elena used to have to march every year with a scratchy puffy dress and her hair in long, thick black curls. Her shoes would hurt and she’d cry by the end of the short route. Her mother would hand her a sweet *fijos* as soon as she was done. She’d stuff the donut in her chubby face.

But after she'd dishonored the Holy Spirit last year by faking the flu, her mother didn't mention it again. And, Maria Elena didn't bother to ask what Ariala Fernandes was doing at her door talking to her mother a few months before the parade.

"Ai she no want to do it and that's it," her mother said stomping her foot.

Ariala stormed off mumbling, "This generation no good."

Maria Elena's family celebrated as part of the legend related to the plastic statue of Queen Isabel in the living room. It was a statue that used to scare Maria Elena when she was little because she was sure Queen Isabel winked at her one day when no one else was looking.

Maria Elena was very familiar with the story that legend has it that in the 13th century, the wife of King Denis of Portugal, Queen Isabella of Aragon, was terribly distraught by the plight of her people who were suffering from a devastating drought. Famine was widespread throughout her realm. The Queen, in her love and devotion to her people, secretly pilfered bread from under the noses of the palace staff in order to feed the needy.

The King, so the legend goes, suspected what his wife was up to and disapproved of such conduct for a queen, he confronted her one day as she was about to set off from the palace. Queen Isabella had bread concealed under her ornate robe. The King demanded to know what she was up to and miraculously, and to the King's astonishment, (and probably Queen Isabella's) hundreds of rose petals spilled to the floor when she opened her robe. She was the hope of the Portuguese people.

“The only miracle I’d like to see is now is to get accepted at Williams,” Maria Elena said to Linda as a tuba blew a few feet away.

“What, no plans for a hubby?” Linda said exaggerating her shock as she took another swig of her coke, motioning to the old people on the porch.

“Just because you are sweet on Paul Freitas doesn’t mean *I* have to get married,” Maria Elena said. “I’m going to have dinner at the wharf, work, sing and have maids. No sweeping or baking for me.”

“Seriously, you have clouds in your head *mi prima*.”

Suddenly something caught Linda’s attention.

“Hey, look who’s here,” Linda said and turned around so her dress spun flirtatiously.

Two young men, dressed in argyle sweaters despite the heat, their hair combed back in neat slick darkness, walked politely up the front steps.

“Hi ya honey,” Linda hugged Paul.

“Aye Jesus, you stop,” Tia Maria Theresa called out to her.

“Hi Linda,” Paul said shyly.

“Hi Maria Elena. Uhhhm, this is Manuel, he’s my *primo* from Pico but he lives in Diego now. He fishes.”

“Hello,” Maria Elena looked up at him and quickly looked away.

She jumped off the fence.

“Good to meet you,” he said. He was thin, but his face was smooth and tanned and Maria Elena could see strong arms under his sweater. His shoes were freshly polished but had just tracked dirt from the street over them.

Maria Elena’s face flushed so she grabbed Linda’s coke and took a swig. The boys excused themselves from the fence and walked to the porch to say their hellos to the *tias* who eyed them suspiciously. Tio Joao laughed.

The parade was ending and the crowds dispersed with much conversation and laughter.

“Ai Maria Elena, go get these boys some *pao duce* and cokes,” her mother called out with a look of sudden approval.

Maria Elena almost tripped as she opened the screen door. The house still smelled like last night’s cod.

Manuel walked behind her and a cool rush filled the usually stuffy house.

“I’ll help you,” he offered.

She looked at him and he was dark, lean and had a shock of curly hair that wasn’t as slicked back as Benny’s or Paul’s. He smelled good and she thought he might be in his twenties.

They walked back onto the porch and served the bread and sodas to everyone.

“So, you live in San Diego...” she began.

The smell of sweet bread filled the air.

She found the letter the day she bought her dress. She was doing some chores around the house. She didn't mind because pretty soon, she'd have her freedom.

Her mother had attempted to hide the letter in between egg shells and coffee grinds in the trash. There it was, *personally* addressed to *Miss Maria Elena Silva*.

"You opened my letter?!" she asked incredulously standing in the kitchen.

Her mom was making *sopas* and Manuel was coming over for Sunday dinner. They would be married soon and the family loved him.

Her mother's faced dropped when she saw Maria Elena standing firm in the kitchen, left hand on one hip, her right holding the soggy acceptance letter.

"Oh Maria Elena, you make a mess and Manuel comes over soon."

Her mother started mopping the water and egg remnants off the floor.

"They want me to sing with Madame Minerva's San Francisco Chorale and you didn't tell me?" "*Mae*, how could you do that?"

Her voice was pleading, sad.

Maria Elena stood frozen, queasiness rising up to her throat.

"Maria, listen to me," her mother pulled the metal chair from the table. "Give me the letter."

She gently took it from Maria's hand. Maria sat down in stunned silence.

"You no need to go to go sing, you get marry now. You go to San Diego. You no happy?"

"I am *mae*, but, I wish you had told me. It was *my* letter!"

“What would it change now mi filha? We don’t talk this anymore,” her mother said firmly. She ripped the letter into tiny pieces and stuffed the shards in the trash.

“Looky whose here to eat with us,” it was Tio Joao who brought Manuel in the kitchen. “We eat now.”

Maria exchanged a glance with Tia Joao. The old man looked triumphant. She looked at her mother who gave her a pleading look.

“Maria, why you no go pour the wine at the table,” her mother said in the same voice she used to have when Maria Elena was small and had fallen.

“Hi honey,” Manuel hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. Maria couldn’t feel his kiss on her cheek.

They headed for the crowded dining room filled with other relatives.

Maria carried the carafe of wine behind them. She only glanced once at the trash can but could feel a lump rise in her throat. In two days, she’d be married.

She didn’t talk much that night at dinner. She was 18 and had already sent out the announcements. She hadn’t expected to be chosen for the singing group, or she would not have been so eager to have them printed.

The news changed everything. And, it changed nothing.

Her invitations were egg shell white. They’d arrive to her family and friends on the day they did it (she had even sent one to the butcher):

Mr. and Mrs. Mario Silva proudly announce

The marriage of their daughter Maria Elena of Santa Maria to

Mr. Manuel Souza of Calheta de Nesquim, Azores

On Tuesday the twenty-fourth day of June

Nineteen hundred and fifty-eight

Reno, Nevada

At home after September 1, 1958

4420 Temecula Street

San Diego, California

Maria Elena may not have been a college girl or a singing sensation, but she knew enough to contact the *San Pablo News*:

Home in San Diego Sept. 1

Planning to establish a San Diego home after Sept. 1 are Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Souza who were married recently in Reno. Mrs. Souza is the former Maria Elena Silva, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Mario Silva of Santa Maria.

William R Beemer preformed the simple double ring ceremony. For the afternoon ceremony Maria Elena selected an original silk print dress, chic white hat and patent accessories.

Linda Bettencourt, the bride's cousin from Pattersen, was maid of honor. Her dress was also a silk print with which she wore a white hat and patent accessories. Anthony J. Figueiredo was the best man.

Mrs. Souza graduated from Santa Maria High School and is employed in Santa Maria. Her husband attended high school in San Diego and is employed in San Diego.

That was it. After a whirlwind marriage and honeymoon in Reno and Tahoe, she placed the biggest bet of all; she gave up her singing dreams and moved to San Diego with a man she thought she loved.

The wedding announcement was a product of Maria Elena and Linda's vivid imaginations. The truth was: Manuel had only finished the 8th grade. He took a ship and ended up in the lice lines of Ellis Island at 15. His Uncle Joe had sponsored (paid) for him to enter the U.S. and begin what would be a long career in commercial tuna fishing.

Linda would later marry Daniel Machado and settle in Tulare to be the wife of a dairy farmer. San Francisco and Madame Minerva would be a distant memory for Maria Elena.

In San Diego Mary Elena found a rhythm to her life but kept a fondness for all things San Francisco.

“San Diego is just a sleepy Navy town,” she'd tell all who cared to listen. “They don't have much culture here.”

Manuel would leave for a few weeks to sail out of San Diego Bay and fish for blue fin, skipjack and albacore tuna with his uncle and cousins near the Coronado Islands and Baja and sometimes South America. He'd come back for a few weeks while the boat unloaded at one of San Diego's many canneries – only to say goodbye again in a few weeks. The babies would soon come – first Victor and then, two years later, Ellie, a name Maria Elena had read in a novel.

They would buy the house in Point Loma that looked like the other houses on the block; three bedrooms, one bath, single story with a small but promising backyard. They were lucky; they had a corner lot and a giant palm tree and a nice white picket fence.

They were part of the “Proud Portuguese,” a new middle class of fishermen.

They bought a boxer for protection when Manuel was out to sea although it was just an excuse. In 1961 – before the hippies and LSD – you didn’t even lock your doors, not even in San Diego. She loved Pokey and so did 2-year-old Vic. The dog would sit near the toddler, about twice his size, and protect him while he played with his toys or napped on a blanket. Pokey was a gentle giant and Maria Elena would pat his head while she watched *As The World Turns* or talked to her sister-in-law on the phone for hours. She wasn’t afraid as long as the dog was there. She’d change baby Ellie and put her down for a nap, try a new recipe in the kitchen and sneak a peek in the living room where Vic was rolling a toy car down the poor dog’s long back.

“That dog is a saint,” she’d laugh when she was on the phone with Linda, wrapping the long avocado green phone cord around her waist as she stirred the spaghetti sauce.

“Yes Linda, Saint Pokey.”

“What? Yes, that’s right mi prima, everything from *scratch*. I’m trying this new one before Manuel comes home. It has sage and spicy sausage. He loves my cooking. Oh, the baby is crying, I have to go.”

“Kisses to you, too dear, bye.”

It was a hot August evening when Manuel staggered in drunk from a visit to the Catalina Lounge down the street, leaving the yard gate open long enough for Pokey to get out. She was making a tuna casserole when she heard the Chevy's tires squeal and her dear dog's helpless yelps.

Maria Elena tried to capture the life she thought she had left behind. She read the San Francisco papers. She wrote to Madame Minerva. She joined the Republican Women's group that met every Thursday. She bought books on art and literature. She even switched to St. Peter's By the Sea Lutheran Church after having it out with a nun at St. Charles. Her family became more and more confused by her new attitude when they visited –which they didn't too often. She didn't invite them very much – especially after her mom died.

She liked the fact that there were no Portuguese people at St. Peter's. The families were all blond and had names like Linton, Schindler, Bouchard and Harris. They were doctors, lawyers and accountants – not the fishermen who she secretly called “nigger rich” with their gold Continentals and fuchsia curtains and green shag rugs.

While he was away, her nights consisted of a never-ending stream of Sixties television comedies, soap operas and variety shows. During the day there was school and after school she had Vic and Ellie take many, many lessons. She kept busy and drove them to piano, violin, tap dance, tennis – whatever she could make them do in spite of their protests.

Maria Elena played, “What Shall I be?” with eight-year-old Ellie. They were listening to Joan Baez, who was singing on the record player. Maria Elena loved her voice, but not her politics. The hippies are taking over, she’d say to Ellie.

“You can’t be the stewardess mom, because you don’t have nice legs,” Ellie told her loudly, taking away her stewardess game card.

“That’s not very nice Ellie,” she chastised her daughter. “Put the game away now and help me set the table.”

“Aww, I don’t want to.” Ellie whined. “Why do I always have to set the table?”

“Because girls help their mothers, now be quiet and do what I say. Your daddy is coming home soon.”

“No fair, Vic is watching Gunsmoke, why can’t I?”

“Goddamnit Ellie, just stop whining and help me.”

Ellie stormed off to her room. “I hate you mommy.”

Maria Elena was irritated, but it wasn’t a new feeling. She was more annoyed, tired, mad, depressed and sad. But she mustered the energy to set the table like she saw in *Good Housekeeping*.

He may smell from unloading fish, but at least the table will look nice.

She walked into the living room and saw her 10-year-old son splayed out in front of the Magnavox. She switched the knob to the off position.

“It was almost over mom, geez,” Vic stomped off to his room and slammed the door.

“And don’t you slam that goddamn door, young man or your father is going to hear about it.”

“I don’t care. I hate you mommy,” Vic yelled.

She looked at the piano as she walked by, dishrag in hand, stained apron, polyester pants that felt too tight.

Her throat tightened. She looked around. She saw the gold lamps, the orange leather couch, the Magnavox, the dining room table, the new green shag carpet, and the family photos with the fake smiles. It looked just like *Good Housekeeping* March 1968 “Design Your Dream Living Room on a Dime” issue. It also looked like the other Portuguese living rooms in spite of her efforts for something different.

She told herself she had nothing to complain about. The kids were clean. The fence was painted a fresh new coat – something she insisted Manuel do his last trip home. The bills were paid. The ladies at St. Peter all raved about the tuna casseroles she brought to the potlucks. She had her hair done once a week in Ocean Beach and gossiped with her friends at the salon.

She walked to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. She’s wore a sleeveless top. Her arms looked like sun burnt sausages and she smelled burning casserole.

“Yes you did,” Ellie screamed.

“No I didn’t take your dumb game you stupid head,” Vic yelled back.

The back door slammed.

“Stop fighting kids,” she heard his voice above the din. Cats meowed, cars drove by on Catalina, the kids ran, his boots made noise on her freshly scrubbed kitchen floor. The phone rang.

It was so much noise.

“Hi dad,” they said in unison, and seemed happy he was home to save them.

“Where’s your mother, something’s burning.”

“I’ll be there in a minute honey,” she called out, barely above the din.

He answered the phone.

“Hi Joe my friend, yes, I just got home.”

She was relieved he’d be on the phone for a while. Maria Elena opened the medicine cabinet and reached behind the cough syrup on the upper shelf.

There was a prescription bottle of little white pills Dr. McClaggen prescribed to all of the mothers in Point Loma.

She swallowed two and didn’t need any water.

When he was away she watched a lot of television and read a lot of magazines and novels. Sometimes she didn’t bother to cook. They’d go to Char-Burger, McDonald’s, Wienerschnitzel – the kids were happy, she didn’t care. The food tasted dull in her mouth. The pills made her lose her appetite. She watched the hippies on the *Evening News* as they danced and protested and got high on Haight Ashbury.

“Why are you crying mommy?” Ellie asked.

“They are ruining my City,” Maria Elena sobbed.

“San Diego?” Ellie was ten and her mother crying was nothing new

to her.

“No, goddamn it Ellie! San Francisco. A REAL city.”

“Oh,” Ellie backed up a little.

“Yeah, you stupid face,” Vic said to Ellie.

“Shut up Vic,” Ellie ran off to follow him down the hall. It was a good excuse to get away from their mother.

Maria Elena was frozen and stared off in the distance. Sometimes the pills made her feel blank for a few moments. Her eyes were glazed and she didn't blink. It scared the kids, so she tried to catch herself.

The next afternoon they were in the kitchen. Manuel was on a very long trip this time with a few port visits.

“Why can't we go to Silvergate anymore?”

“Because I said you are going to Ocean Beach Elementary now, that's it!” Maria Elena was in the kitchen making pancakes.

“It's because of the Negros, we can't go to school with them,” Ellie offered.

“Oh, shut up Ellie,” Maria Elena said. “Eat your goddamn breakfast and get ready. You're late.”

After breakfast they piled in the blue station wagon and went down the hill to the poorer part of town and Ocean Beach Elementary. They signed up and their teachers met them at their classroom doors.

“It was just closer to work and better for after-school child care now that I might be going to work at a collections company,” Maria Elena lied to Ellie’s teacher when she dropped her off in the classroom. They exchanged knowing glances.

“We have had *a lot* of transfers from Silvergate,” the teacher said.

Manuel was home less and less. She took more and more pills. The kids reluctantly went Raul’s Market with her.

“Take a basket each,” she ordered.

“Ahh mom, why do we have to buy *so much food*? It’s embarrassing and dad isn’t here and we have so much already,” said Vic.

“Just be quiet young man and come with me.”

She walked firmly into the store and noticed a Mexican woman buying her items with Food Stamps.

“At least I pay with *my* own hard-earned money,” she announced loudly. Vic’s ears went red.

The Mexican woman looked at Maria Elena like she was going to cry.

Ellie walked ahead of her mother, pretending she didn’t know her. She wanted the Mexican lady to take her home.

Maria Elena, Ellie and Vic tossed food from a giant list into the basket. Raul’s was a family-owned store with fresh meat and produce and plenty of neighbors looking in each other’s carts. The kids were fascinated by Paul Raul’s lost finger and the fact, in spite of that, he cut the meat with the giant saw that had taken his poor digit.

When they left the store, they loaded the station wagon with sacks of Ding Dongs, canned peas, peaches, tuna, and pork chops, anything that would keep until Manuel came home. They drove by Jack in the Box on the way home with a car full of groceries.

Once when Ellie came back from Camp Yoliwja, Maria Elena got mad because her daughter's tan made her look Mexican.

“Why are you so dark and you look like a hippie - take that headband off.”

“Oh mom, why are you always so uptight. Peace out,” Ellie said flashing her mom the peace sign and storming off to her room. By 14, Ellie had the moves pretty well down and all but tuned out her mother's shouting.

The phone rang.

Maria Elena sighed as she picked up the avocado receiver.

“Hello?” “Hello?” “Who is this?”

She paused.

“Who is this?!”

There was only breathing. Then...

“Manuel there?”

This one sounded Panamanian, she thought. But they all sounded slightly the same (young), slightly different (with different accents) although Maria Elena sharpened her skills at picking out which south or central American country they were from. She knew, because she started to ask them.

“Your little whore is from Panama, I can tell. She called by the way – OVER!”
She yelled at him on the Ham Radio when he called from fishing.

“I don’t know what you are taking about. I have to go,” Manuel slammed down the phone and the call was over.

Every Saturday Maria Elena listened to the New York Metropolitan Opera. Even when the fishing moved to Samoa, and she’d only see him every five months, she listened. It was her favorite part of the week.

Ellie and Vic had long moved out and rarely visited. She was in a wheelchair and had a stream of Mexican and Black caretakers. She had grown to like them even though she was still a staunch opposition to even voluntary busing.

The caretakers listened to her stories about The City when no one else would. She even sang for a few of them and they would smile.

When Maria Elena died Ellie took her two friends from St. Peter’s – who were not Portuguese - to help throw her Maria Elena’s ashes into the Pacific. Her father was home for the funeral but on a plane the very next day. He told Ellie to “do what she wanted to do” with her mom’s ashes.

Her father was away with his new wife and kids in Samoa when Ellie threw the ashes overboard.

Ellie knew Maria Elena had sailed once when she was younger, in San Francisco Bay. She wanted to give her once last chance to sail. And when she scattered Maria Elena’s sad ashes, she threw her mom’s favorite sunflowers into the ocean.

Opera music played and they felt a cool breeze.



Antonio's Garden

Ellie remembers the time she fell out of her grandfather's 1959 Pontiac. She was seven and her mother had finally given in and let her dad – their grandfather - drive Ellie and her brother Vic to his house. Her mom was going to do her “day without the kids” coloring and styling treat which meant a visit to a salon in Ocean Beach. Ellie and Vic waited in their living room until they saw his car pull up and honk. Their mother was at the rinse and repeat cycle of her hair by the time he came, having left earlier and exasperated that he was always late.

When they saw his car, Ellie and Vic ran out the door, not locking it because in those days you didn't lock anything. That was before what their mom called “The Hippies” took over Ocean Beach and made her mom afraid.

Vic was in the front seat hanging on to the white leather cushion; his head turned back sticking his tongue out at Ellie while their grandfather sped down Catalina Boulevard and took the left turn on the Narragansett hill a little too hard. The door flew open and Ellie spilled out onto the street.

It never occurred to Ellie, until much later in life, that her spilling out of his bright turquoise convertible might have had something to do with how his breath smelled. At the time, she blamed herself. She had not shut the door very hard, and with physics and a shiny patent leather backseat, it was scientifically impossible not to fall out.

Ellie was careful to not slam doors as hard as she had, given the fainting incident with Pam Kness a few weeks earlier. They were at St. Peters, which was the Lutheran

church her mom made them join when Ellie was five after her mom denounced the Catholics. Ellie dutifully drove with her mom and neighbors to another neighbor's funeral. Once they arrived at the church, Ellie accidentally slammed the door on Pam's fingers. It was about 20 minutes later when Ellie saw the Pacific Southwest Airlines stewardess faint dramatically from the church pew. Pam was revived and the neighbor's funeral carried on. When they were having cake in the church hall, Ellie overheard Pam talking about how the little "brat" had slammed the door on her fingers, causing the fainting spell. Ellie put her cake down and walked away, vowing never to like Pam again, even when she smiled that fake stewardess smile at her. Ellie was silent all the way home in the car and wanted to rip Pam's large, white dangling earrings out of her earlobes.

"Grandpa! Stop! Ellie has fallen out of the back seat! It was Vic, suddenly concerned for his younger sister.

Their grandfather slammed on the brakes, halfway up the Narragansett hill. He backed up the car and Ellie simply got up, dusted the asphalt off her bloody knees and slid back on the patent leather, shutting the door hard this time.

"Ai Jesus Ellie, you fall out of the car. Lock the door this time."

And off they went.

When they got to his house Ellie found his stash of gauze, bandages and rubbing alcohol – he fell a lot too - and doctored her knees by herself.

After she was done, she happily walked into the kitchen. He handed them 7-Up, Ritz crackers and Doublemint gum and poured himself a large high ball.

“Ahhh,” they all said as they gulped their drinks and then laughed. It was fun there and he didn’t have a lot of rules.

They ran out the front screen door of the Spanish-style house to his grassy front yard with the fig tree. The Mendoza kids were already there and a game of Freeze Tag promptly ensued. Grandpa sat on the front porch, drink in hand, hand-rolled cigarette falling off the side of his mouth. He pushed back his worn fedora and fell into the gauzy drowsiness of too much V.O.

“Why do you have bandages on your knees Ellie?” Lisa Mendoza demanded over the din of their game.

“She fell out of grandpa’s car,” Vic offered.

Ellie shot him a look. They both looked at their grandfather who was dozing off.

“Our mom won’t let Mr. Braga drive us anywhere,” Lisa said with her high-and-mighty gaze at him.

“How about Hide and Seek?” Vic changed the subject. He didn’t want the car incident getting back to their mother. She would scream at their grandpa like when she found out he performed summersaults for them down his street or let them have homemade wine in Dixie Cups in the garage with his friends.

They played Hide and Seek until Mrs. Mendoza walked up the sidewalk pushing a pram with baby Michael inside.

“Where’s your mom kids?” she asked, giving their snoring grandpa a dismal look.

She’s getting her hair done,” Vic said.

“Ellie fell out of his car when they were driving here,” Lisa said, pointing at Ellie’s bandages.

Ellie felt her face grow red and hot.

“That’s not true you stupid head.”

“Ellie, what would your mother think with talk like that?” Mrs. Mendoza said gently.

“It’s time for you kids to come home anyway,” she said to the Mendoza kids. “Your grandma’s here and made *sopas* and *filozes*. Go wash your hands.”

“Ellie and Vic, go wake up Mr. Braga and go inside the house. I hope he’s feeding you dinner. And Vic, please tell your *mae* to call me when she picks you up. I hope she’s picking you up?!”

“Yes ma’am. We are eating when my mom comes to get us. C’mon Ellie.”

Ellie waited until Mrs. Mendoza had her back to them to stick her tongue out at Lisa’s snide smile. She ran to the front door, opened it and slammed it, waking her grandfather.

“Oh, Ellie, no slam the door,” he said and slowly got out of his chair on the porch and went inside.

“Go turn on the record. Get some more 7-Ups and you want cookies Mrs. Azevedo make for me?”

“Is Mrs. Azevedo your girlfriend?” Ellie asked him while Vic got out their favorite album, *Songs of Tony The Tiger* with the cartoon tiger from the box of corn flakes.

“They’reeeeeee greeeeaaaaatttt!” The kids shouted.

“Ai Jesus Ellie, she’s my friend. I once work with Mr. Azevedo.”

“But grandma is dead and he is dead, why don’t you marry her?”

“Because I no like get married Ellie, I like living this fancy life.”

Ellie and Vic laughed and their grandfather started dancing around the room.

They turned up the music and joined him.

Their grandpa could really do some moves – the twist, the mashed potato, and sprinkler. He moved the coffee table and lamps and they joined him in the *corridinho* and the *bailarico*.

“How did you learn these dances Grandpa?” Vic asked.

“Ahhh, when I was a young boy in Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, I go to dances every week. I would dance like this with all the girls of the village. Even with the goats and pigs. Then, I even win dance contest,” he said, swirling Ellie around as she giggled.

“Was that before you built the Golden Gate?” Vic asked.

“Yes, tell us about that,” Ellie said.

Vic turned off the record and they sat down. Their grandfather was winded.

“I come here when I was a boy...”

“But after you won the dance contest,” Vic offered.

“And after you saved your friend from drowning,” Ellie chimed in.

“And after you saved your *Tio Joao* from choking on sweet bread,” Vic added.

“Ahhh yes, you kids you remember good. Anyway, I come here on a boat from Santa Maria. And we went to San Fransis. I was a little boy and they had the big fire. We lose our house in the fire.”

“It was the earthquake of 1906,” Vic said.

Ellie looked at her brother. He always remembered dates and stories and times. She couldn't even remember to bring her thermos home from school.

“Yes, the earthquake it lasted thirty seconds, the fire, it lasted three days.”

Their grandfather told them about the great fire and how he eventually got a job helping build the Golden Gate Bridge, supporting his parents and nine siblings.

Halfway through his story he shook his head and said, “You go get your *vovô* a drink Ellie,” his eyes misty. “Remember, when you go to Dana Jr. High, you help me clean house. And when you get married, I give you this house.”

Ellie brought his drink back to him, alive with the possibilities of the junior high down the street, not having the heart to say she never wanted to get married and have the sad life her mom had. She wanted to be a writer and have a glamorous life. But, his house would do until she bought her mansion.

Her mom's bright blue station wagon pulled up in the driveway. It was turning dusk. She would pick them up and she and Vic and her mom would eat and watch *The Carol Burnett Show* and *Mary Tyler Moore* that night. She wanted her grandfather to come to their house, but he never could.

“Mom's here,” she said. “We have to go.” She kissed her grandfather's cheek and ran out the front screen door.

“Awww, I don’t wanna go now,” Vic whined.

“I tell you story later Vic, you go now get dinner.”

“Why don’t you come with us grandpa?” Vic asked him, pulling on his rough hand.

“I eat my *bacalhau* Mrs. Azevedo make for me. You go now.”

Vic kissed his grandfather’s cheek and ran out the door.

Antonio got off the couch and waved good-bye to the kids from the porch.

“Why don’t you ever wave back at him?” Vic asked their mom.

“What do you kids want at Der Wienerschnitzel, how about chili dogs and orange soda?” she offered.

“Yippeee,” they cheered.

They drove away and forgot about their grandpa, eating his fish stew by himself.

Their mom’s hair was a new color and Ellie thought it looked like an orange brown cloud touching the car’s ceiling or a stack of cotton candy only it would be root beer flavored. It was higher each week – like Wilma Flintstones’ hair. Ellie thought that someday it would poke through the roof of the car.

When Ellie was 10 she wrote a short story about her grandpa’s garden for school. Her teacher, Mrs. Costa, gave her an A and a smiley face. After school, Ellie ran into the kitchen to show her mother who was making a potato chip casserole.

“Please read my story Mommy – I got an A and a smiley face,” Ellie was pleased with herself. She shoved the paper in her mom’s face.

“Oh Ellie, I’m busy right now. I’ll read it later.”

It took days for her mother to read it – but Ellie finally persuaded her mom after she switched of the television one night.

My Grandpa’s Garden, by Ellie Souza

My grandpa Antonio Braga has the best garden I have ever seen. It has couves and I think that is portugees for lettuce and some cukes my mom calls them that and some onions and carrots and some egg-plant and some other stuff. But the very bestest thing in my grandpas garden is really his fig tree that is not really in his garden at all but beyond the garden by the fence and one on the front lawn. We peel and eat fig guts from it morning, noon and night! He waters with care. I help him pull weeds and plant seeds and water and he gives them sunlight. Well, really, God does that part. But he lets us eat the harvest.

I love my grandpa and hes a good man and helped build the bridge in San Francisco I think and won dance constests and was in a fire and then he came here coz his wife died. He is my mom’s father. He doesn’t live very far from my house and I see him only with my brother every Sat. when my mom gets her hair done. He is a good man and I love my grandpa.

The end.

Ellie was so happy to show the story to her mom, who read it without emotion. She handed it back to Ellie and walked out of the room.

“Don’t you like it mommy?”

“Nevermind Ellie. Help me with dinner.”

It was always like that when Ellie or Vic brought up their grandfather to their mom.

Once when Ellie was in her bedroom, she heard her mom crying in the living room. Her dad was home from sea and his job as a tuna fisherman and they were talking in low voices. All Ellie could hear her say was, “That man causes me nothing but pain.”

Her dad was talking in muffled sounds and Ellie guessed they were hugging and knew her mom was really upset.

One Easter her mom had experimented with making a rabbit and they had a big family dinner at their house. Her grandfather was there too, slipping off his chair and his words were blurry toward the end of the meal. Ellie was happy he was there. Her *Tia* Lucilia and *Tio* Pete and four cousins were also there.

“Ah, what this Maria? You make the kids *eat* the Easter Bunny?”

Ellie ran off to barf up her meal, but barfed up more chocolate candy than bunny.

She sat on the toilet, listening to screaming and dishes breaking in the kitchen.

Then she heard her grandfather’s tires screeching up Catalina Boulevard. She was called out of the bathroom to say a prompt farewell to her cousins and aunt and uncle.

After his liver started to fail and he was weak, her mom put her grandfather into Point Loma Rehabilitation Hospital. It was a sad, smelly dismal place with yellow walls and old ladies in dirty nightgowns crying out to Ellie as she walked by. Their grandfather was healthier than most, even with his failing liver.

Late one night, he got out of his bed, put on his plaid shirt, olive pants and Fedora and walked out to a pay phone where he called a cab. He didn't have his little house to go to anymore since his mother sold it to pay for his bills. He took the cab to Ocean Beach, a few miles away. He checked into the Ocean Beach Hotel with the hippies and the European backpackers, a 1920s ramshackle pay-by-the-week hotel a few blocks from the beach. He became its oldest resident for more than a year.

He called the kids one day when their mom was away.

"Come visit me, I miss you," he said in his hoarse, slurred voice.

Ellie and Vic secretly met their grandfather in a coffee shop in Ocean Beach, during school recess or lunch at their school up the street. They were pulled away from Silvergate nearer to their house after their mother didn't want them at school with the black kids who were bussed in. In those days, a lot of the mothers yanked their kids out of Silvergate.

"But what about David Jones?" Ellie asked her. "I went to kindergarten with him and he's black but doesn't take the bus. His dad drives him in a Mercedes."

"David is different," Ellie's mom said. "His father is a *doctor* and they actually live in Point Loma, so it's *different*. Besides, he has white features; I think his mom might be half white."

Their mother tracked their grandfather down several weeks later at the Ocean Beach Hotel and was, “madder than a wet hen,” she told her friends. But when she also realized she couldn’t keep him at the convalescent hospital, she would call the hotel.

“Just put Mr. Braga on the phone and yes, ‘peace’ to you too,” she said irritated.

The conversation would get louder and she’d talk Portuguese and eventually slammed down their green kitchen wall phone.

Ellie and Vic would sneak away from school and meet their grandfather at *The Village Kitchen*. He treated them to hot dogs, fries and sodas. Helga Peterson, who would later succeed at committing suicide after the fourth attempt, gave them extra fries and smiled like she knew something but wouldn’t tell.

“You have fine looking grandchildren Mr. Braga,” she’d say. Ellie noticed that sometimes the fries weren’t on the bill.

Once, Ellie and Vic ventured to the lower part of Newport Avenue -- the “War Zone” -- where they were strictly forbidden by their mother. They walked past *The Black* with its bongos and pipes and *High Times* magazines and the *In Between* with its young pregnant hippies outside waiting for appointments. They went to the hotel which made Ellie’s stomach queasy thinking what their mom would do to them if she knew. That would be angry swats with the flyswatter for sure.

They walked to the back of the first floor in the creaky hotel where he had a small room with a bed, a side table and a sad looking plant. He shared the bathroom with the other tenants.

When Vic and Ellie sat with him on the porch that looked out over Newport Avenue, they could hear the sound of the ocean and were joined by five or so others. One young woman looked like the pictures Ellie had seen of Janis Joplin, the singer she really liked.

“Hi,” Vic said when he noticed the young blonde woman smiling at them.

“I can’t believe you’re Antonio’s grandkids, that totally blows my mind,” she said, taking a puff of a hand-rolled joint and offering it to them.

The shook their heads in shock and gulped fearing their mom’s station wagon driving slowly down the street.

“This girl here, her name is Rainbow, I guess. That’s what she’s called, anyway,” their grandfather said and shrugged and spit out a piece of his hand-rolled nicotine cigarette.

“We should go back to school,” Vic said nervously. “Bye Grandpa.”

On their walk the few blocks back to school, Vic told Ellie he thought they would be arrested for the marijuana Rainbow was smoking.

“Then mom would be madder than she already is,” Ellie said.

They both shook their heads and ran back to school before the bell.

When he was back in the hospital after the few months at the Newport Hotel didn't help his health or his drinking, Ellie looked at some photo albums her mom had in their den. There were old pictures of her grandfather, with his beautiful young wife. They were both dressed up, with slight smiles, looking hopeful at the photographer. There were other photos and newspaper clippings as well. *Antonio Braga promoted at Frietas Plumbing*, was one headline. *Antonio Braga elected to San Pablo Town Council*, was another.

“No wonder they named the street after him,” she said aloud.

In a box, Ellie found her mom's small childhood bracelet, photos of her mom as a child and a round locket with a picture of her mother – Ellie's grandmother – a fair skinned Portuguese beauty.

When she was 13, Ellie's mind was filled with junior high, her crush on Donny Osmond. Her favorite song was “Just like a yo-yo,” and “Puppy Love.” She dreamt of becoming a rich and famous writer. Her father was out fishing most of the time and her brother annoyed her. She was a hard-core McGovern supporter, read *Ms. Magazine*, but still liked boys who were seniors in high school and couldn't wait to move out of her soul-sucking house. It was the house where her mom took too many bills and where her father drank more and more each time he came home.

Always the rebellious sort, it was the house where she put a sign on the front lawn when she was 14 that said, “People Before Porpoise.” That was when those “god damned environmentalists wanted to save the dolphin and porpoise that were caught in the purse

seine fishing nets. That was before Ellie joined Greenpeace and The Green Party and was a staunch recycler.

She didn't visit her grandfather much except when her mom's nagged her to go. It wasn't worth the fight. Ellie would skulk in to the nursing home, mad at her mom. She ignored the old ladies in their wheelchairs in the hall who held their bony arms out to her.

His home wasn't his anymore and it certainly wasn't going to be Ellie's like he promised her.

Her mother had sold it to pay for the convalescent home bills. The place still smelled like creamed corn, urine and Lysol. It also had a stronger, sadder smell – loneliness and death. She hated it even more than before his great escape.

Her grandfather had a quiet look of resignation in his eyes and Ellie knew he had given up.

She sat outside her grandfather's room with her grandfather in his sad wheelchair and her in a chair between him and her mom who spoke in Portuguese to him with an eerie calm. Her grandfather would look over and ask Ellie in English how school was. He was pale and thin and his Fedora was too big for his head but he insisted on wearing it. His false teeth looked too big for his mouth, like they'd drop out of his head any second. When he stared off into the distance, Ellie wondered if he was remembering standing on the platform looking out on the San Francisco Bay and building the bridge. He had always told her it was "break the back work" but that he had the "time of life."

He died on her 15th birthday. The last time she saw him, she ran out of his room, too upset to stay. He looked like a shell of himself, with his Fedora on the bedside table, and Mrs. Azevedo praying the rosary frantically beside him. Her mother had a strange look on her face and she noticed her dad had tears in his eyes.

“That is NOT my grandfather,” she said as he reached out to her.

Years later Ellie would drive by his house. It was reinvented by flippers and sold for five times what he had originally bought it for. The last time she drove by, it had a large wood retaining wall around the front yard. The fig tree had long since been pulled out of the ground.

There was a wall in her heart that kept the anger there; at her grandfather for dying and her mother for not loving him. She didn't think her mother loved her either; so consumed by pain and pills and depression. His Pontiac had long been sold to a collector.

It was at AA meetings where she'd talk about “what it was like, what happened and what it was like now.” Most people who spoke about the alcoholics in their lives did it with venom. She had loved her grandfather even when he slurred his words.

When he would have celebrated his 100th birthday, she and Vic, always the keeper of dates, flew to San Francisco. They rented a car and drove to San Pablo. Peeling apartments with graffiti stood where their mom was raised. Braga Lane was only one block long and the black people her mother distained had taken over, making it one of the most crime ridden cities in the East Bay.

They made it to the Portuguese cemetery right before it closed. They found his grave. Ellie brought flowers from her mother's garden at the house where Vic now lived. The house that was long absent of her mother who died at an early age. She put them on his grave.

It was sunset when they drove back over the Golden Gate Bridge. They looked at its sturdy bones, now rusty with age and years of people driving Pontiacs over its long expanse.

Tavita

She's thinking of her plan as she looks at Tavita.

He is 10 and tall and lanky for his age. He's spilling over with energy as he jumps on the mossy rocks with the new *Nikes* Ellie brought him. He carries a camera and a water bottle she also brought. The bottle has the logo of the corporate giant, a gas and electric company, where she works. Ellie looks at Tavita. He doesn't seem to mind the mud. The humidity makes drops of sweat cling to his brown face, and his short, black hair is sticking straight up. He's also wearing the tank top she gave him. The shirt has a flying seagull and the letters "Venice Beach" for the hippie beach town where Ellie lives back in LA. A T-shirt printer gave her 40 shirts gratis. The printer, Robbie, still pursues her and is trying to score points with the free T-shirts and tank tops. He visited 15 years ago and staggered drunk and stoned throughout Pago Pago. He says he wants to retire in Samoa and thinks Ellie is his ticket.

When she first arrived at Tafuna International Airport in her silk blouse in 100 percent humidity, she gave some of the T-shirts away to her father's adopted family. His second "family" consisted of a never-ending stream of Samoan uncles, aunties and cousins. They ranged from the old and toothless to the young and diapered.

The T-shirts will help defend her, if it ever comes to that, she thought. They'd take the shirts, smile at Ellie with sandy white teeth and walk shyly away. She gave the rest of the T-shirts to villagers in Lauli'i. That's the village where Ellie's father, Manuel Alfredo Souza, now lives. It's a cluster of small houses, white churches, and dilapidated stores with barking dogs. It's a 20-minute ride from the airport far from the main road, shops and smoke of Pago Pago on the island of Tutuila in American Samoa.

Smack in the middle of the Pacific. Five hours from Hawaii, another five-and-a-half-hours from California. They could not be more isolated. Ellie was feeling the isolation but thought the T-shirts would build a shaky bridge.

A T-shirt from the U.S. was a hot commodity there. But a T-shirt from *California* was like gold. The shirts she brought are all sizes: small, medium, large and triple XXX large for her stepmother's Uncle TiTi and Auntie Tula who needed a special seat on the bus they took from Lauli'I to market.

Here she was; Manuel Souza's daughter, the unmarried, childless, 38-year-old wonder from the U.S. She was rocketed into another dimension; her father's other life.

"Oh look at the big cheese," he said when he picked her up. She was both irritated and frightened to see him but there was also a feeling of warm familiarity. It was years of lies, his drunken calls, shouts, hang ups, and unanswered letters. She only saw him when he visited his other family – she and her mom and brother - in California. And often he did that begrudgingly, going in the guest bedroom to talk on the phone when she visited.

Ellie hadn't seen him since her mom's sudden death of a heart attack at 64.

But she wasn't there to see *him* anyway. She was on a mission.

“Hi dad,” she kissed his leathery cheek, full of stubble. She could smell the VO on his breath. It was later in the day, so he’d been drinking for a while but he seemed in a relatively good mood. She met them all and was especially happy to see Tavita. He gave her a shy but warm hug – happy to see his Portuguese sister from the States who could be his salvation.

A few days later – after swimming, watching bad reruns on a black and white TV, and village walks –she suggested they visit the preserve. It’s was part of her plan. She had it mapped out in her head, but never having been to Samoa, she knew it would be tricky.

“Sure, take the kid wherever you want,” her dad laughed, half-drunk.

“Just don’t get too lost and be back by Goddamn dinner. Potu’s making a traditional Goddamn Samoan feast.”

He was a little less friendly a few hours after the airport pick up. The façade was off. The wall was starting to crumble like the ones near the old village church. The novelty of his daughter being at his other house was wearing off. The rest of the family – his wife Potu, their younger child Rapi and the cousins – they all treated her with the reverence one has for Mother Theresa. Her father only remembered why his troubles might be her fault.

“Thanks Dad, thanks Potu, come on Tavita,” she had a knot in her stomach, but in more suitable clothes now for the sticky weather. It was still walking on eggshells around her father though. Combine that with a moving ball of fear and she felt woozy.

“We go too,” the village kids told her when they waited for the bus across from her dad’s house. And, before she could think of an excuse to shoo them off, Tavita said, “Oh, you no go this time. I’ll be alone with my sistah.”

Ellie looked at Tavita’s tank top as they clomped through the preserve. The red went well with his dark hair. The thick rainforest was wet, green and muddy. Small red, pink and yellow flowers peeked at them through large, green leaves. The plants threw sprinkles of water in the air.

They arrived at the preserve by a rickety, wooden bus, painted purple and blue with dusty, old Christmas decorations, hanging from the driver's rearview mirror, even though it was July.

The preserve was miles up from Pago Pago Bay, but the air still smelled salty. When they got off the bus, villagers from the valley looked at them with blank stares.

“*Fa'afetai*,” they said to the bus driver who dropped them off.

It was in the preserve that she began to unroll her plan – at least in her mind. She had four thousand dollars in \$20s in her backpack. She had made airline reservations for them both. They even had a few days in Hawaii before going back to L.A.

He didn’t have a clue. Neither did the old man.

Tavita and Ellie laughed and talk.

“It’s so beautiful here,” said Ellie. “I’m so happy to be with you and not working so much.”

“I’m happy too because I have no work I have to do for Dad and don’t have to take care of Rapi,” said Tavita.

The preserve was a national park. It had a short, chain-link fence and some standard U.S. signs marking its entrance. The signs were put up courtesy of the states for its island territory. But there were no park rangers or maps or organized trails like in the States. It was just an isolated park behind a rusty fence. Thankfully, there were also no old tires, used plastic diapers or other trash like in Pago Pago Bay below. There were signs around Tutuila that said, "Keep Samoa Beautiful." The idea was catching on with some islanders, but not all of them.

Still, Ellie thought the island was beautiful and it made parts of Hawaii look like the tacky plastic palm trees and wind-up hula girls tourists buy in Waikiki novelty stores.

But sometimes, it seemed the trash appeared out of nowhere. The sand in back of Ellie’s dad’s house was usually pristine. But if there was a storm, the churning waters offered up dead pigs, gray fish, flat tires and beer bottles from other villages. Navigating debris was the hazard anyone faced while sunbathing the day after a tropical squall.

Ellie was panting and out of breathe. She was wearing stretch pants and a purple shirt, hardly kidnapping clothes. She had their jackets in her backpack and was relieved to think about this. Her tennis shoes were caked with mud. Beads of sweat danced down her olive skin. The twenty pounds extra she wanted to leave in the States had stubbornly come with her. She huffed and coughed and struggled to step in and out of the mud. She looked at Tavita. She watched him run his hand along a bumpy, mossy, slimy rock.

"Hey look at dis," he said.

"There's no one else here but us, I guess we should follow this mud path, what do you think David?"

"Tavita" means "David" in Samoan. Ellie went back and forth with what she should call him. When she first made the long-distance call to Samoa eight months earlier, it was awkward.

"Hi, I'm from your father's *other* family," she said. Tavita seemed okay with that simple sentence. He called her Hellie instead of Ellie. That's because Potu, her dad's wife, called her that. Samoan was their first language. Potu was 45, short, with dark hair and a petite body. She smiled and laughed a lot. She had fewer lines near her eyes than Ellie. She was patient and kind.

Ellie thought calling her brother "David" was denying his heritage, but "Tavita" was too personal. She was trying to catch up on 10 lost years of personal pronouns. He was too big to sit on her lap and his friends couldn't believe this grown woman was his sister.

"You lie, she's too old," his friend Savina told David when he proudly said, "Hellie is my sistah."

Tavita was balancing himself on two slimy green rocks. He guzzled from his water bottle that hung from a purple string around his neck.

"Dis place, its very nice," Tavita said, and then walked ahead. The area was leafy thick with plants that grew over the mud path. The plants were so heavy in some places

that they pushed them aside to move. It smelled like rain and the glazed bananas Tavita ate.

When he was upstairs in their 65-year-old father's house, he ate what Ellie's dad ate; white Weber's bread, bacon, bologna sandwiches, Fritos and Pepsi. It's upstairs that Tavita used his Play Station, listened to his Walkman and watched re-runs of *The Munster's* on *Nick at Night*. When Tavita went downstairs, where his cousins Potu and Saroná sleep and cook, he ate taro, fresh fish and rice. He was well fed in both places, but went to hide downstairs after one of his father's drunken rants or when his father slapped him so hard it left a mark. Ellie saw his bruises when she first hugged him. It left a lasting lump in her throat and a memory of when she was his age. How many times had her father's hand smashed slow motion into her face for some minor offense?

"I'll knock all your teeth out," he had said angrily. And at the time, she believed he would have, had her mom not stepped in to make him stop. It was one of many times she had to cover up bruises with long sleeves or the puffiness around her black eyes with make-up. When he wasn't drunk everyone she knew "loved Manuel Souza." She found it frustrating and confusing. And, she sometimes thought if only she became perfect, he would be happier and she could make him stop.

"Your father, he's a wonderful man," Maria Azevedo said when Elle opened her family's door when she was a child and the old woman brought her father homemade Portuguese white cheese. Just moments before he had slapped Ellie for spilling ice on the bar when she helped him make drinks for visiting relatives. No one else had seen the slap.

She felt it into the evening. The lump in her throat stayed for three days. But a tense smile was painted over her mouth and she could act better than Meryl Streep in those moments.

"Isn't this nice? It's great that you and I get to spend time alone," Ellie pushed clumps of her hair out of her damp face. She thought of going to Upolu and Savaii to see Potu's cheerful relatives with Tavita. Perhaps they would be far enough away and her father couldn't track her down as fast. Once they got back home, she would have to move from her little rental house by the beach to another location more inland since expenses would go up. It was work she would have to handle gingerly and discreetly. She'd have to get Child Protective Services involved – in both countries. It would be tricky and complicated and dramatic. It was something she was used to from her own childhood when her elementary school nurse began questioning the bruises on her arms.

When she brought up going to another island with Tavita, her Dad, who had already seemed to tire of her said, "That's okay if you go with Tavita, but take Sa, he doesn't like women."

Sa was one of his cheerful relatives – a *fa'afafine*, but he dressed in neutral clothes and was rail thin. Samoa had its share of transvestites and although Sa didn't dress in heels or paint his nails, he seemed to know the *fa'afafine* with the blonde wig at the Pago Pago Bay Club where they all went for dinner. Even her father smiled at her when she took her order. Ellie thought this odd behavior for a man who laughed at women breast feeding their babies discreetly in public.

Of course, there were a few nice moments when she was there. The first night of her visit, Tavita's friends surrounded him and smiled at her. They sat barefoot on the well-swept floor. They stared, open-mouthed at the television, awed by Tavita's worldly goods.

"Maybe he's okay," she would think.

Everything was nice enough, she thought. Ellie's dad lived in a simple bright blue concrete house. Even in Samoa, far from his native Azores Islands in Portugal, he had to paint his house the brightest color in the village, Ellie laughed.

She remembered their bright blue station wagon in San Diego that everyone called the tuna mobile. She remembered the trips to SeaWorld and the Zoo. Her dad laughed more when she was little and she would hang from his neck as he walked.

His first few years in Samoa seemed happy.

Now, he sat at the kitchen table of his neat Lau'i'i house and said, "Just bury me in the front yard like everyone else here."

"That way, they are always with you," Potu explained to Ellie.

Mostly, her dad just grunted and walked outside with his High Ball, the traditional drink of the tuna fisherman.

"I wonder how all of our Tia Marias would feel buried by my Birds of Paradise and daisies," Ellie offered.

"The flowers would die from their nagging," Manuel called from outside where he sat to watch the sunset.

Ellie laughed. He would have his moments where he could be really funny and relaxed. But most of the time, he'd bite down on an idea so hard you could imagine his mouth bleeding. He'd have to be right in every discussion. A large vein would ripple on his forehead and he would turn red.

"These people are all so stupid..." he said, his words getting louder and louder with each syllable. It didn't matter if it was the U.S. government, the Samoans or his relatives he ranted about. He'd be right and they were all wrong. The world was falling apart. He was the only one with the answers.

It was times like these she knew she had no ammunition. Her arsenal had been spent years ago. She was too war-worn to fight. She just had to agree with him to prevent an even louder explosion. She raised the white flag so the enemy wouldn't completely rip her to shreds.

Of Tavita's friends, Ellie liked Taufau the best. She was a chubby, friendly 11-year-old girl with huge, brown eyes. She helped Ellie pronounce Samoan words.

Wili was her second favorite. He was an impish boy who showed her eels and he laughed when she screamed.

These kids don't complain about their simple life, she thought. Instead of electronics, they got hugs from relatives, lazy afternoons in aquamarine water and heaping plates of rice and fried taro. Their deeply rooted pride in what it meant to be Samoan was as thick as the clouds that clung to Tutuila's jagged cliffs.

But mostly, she and Tavita were yelled at. If nothing else, the old man was consistent and respected and feared by the villagers.

Manuel, Rapi and Potu – Ellie’s dad, brother and stepmother - walked in the house and ignored Tavita and his friends. His friends watched Tavita slay the animated dragon with the move of a joystick.

Ellie was tired a lot from the humidity. Potu reached in the freezer and handed her chilled coconut water in its shell.

When Ellie sat at night with Sa yards from the lapping water they talked about his work at the Starkist tuna cannery near Pago Pago where the American and other fishing boats unloaded. He was 32, with a smile as wide as the horizon.

"Do you see the same stars that we see here in Lau'i'i?" Sa once asked her.

"Yes," Ellie leaned back on the sand watching the night twinkle back at her.

She had a lump in her throat that reminded her of something. When she was five she and her brother Vic saw a gauzy angel dancing in the night sky. Through all of their fights and blurry years, every once in a while they'd smile and say, "Remember the night?"

That's the same magic Ellie felt with Sa.

"This tropical night sky could burst right open. I feel like we're linked to the earth, the sky, the water and billions of human souls everywhere," she said.

Sa just smiled and looked up. Sarona joined them. She was Potu's pretty 19-year-old cousin. She was chunky, funny and usually wearing the Walkman Potu and Manuel bought her in the States. She had Samoan tribal tattoos around her thighs.

Ellie drank from the case of diet soda Manuel insisted on buying her at Cost U Less and storing near her suitcase so the kids wouldn't drink it. She watched *Nick at Night* on his cable with Tavita.

The next day, she moved from Manuel's living room with the bright yellow Polynesian print curtains and matching slipcovers, and splayed herself on the beach in front of his house. She jumped up and swam with Rapi in the turquoise water. Her skin turned golden brown – the same color of the Samoan's around her. Later, she shopped with Saronā in Fagatogo at the Korean stores. Her dad picked them up and Ellie sat in the bed of her father's truck. Whenever Ellie was in her dad's silver truck, it was also with the family, and villagers who hitched rides into town or back to the village. When he was driving, he was the funny man she remembered when she was younger.

Manuel sat in the driver's seat, wearing a red cap with *Alicia Elizabeth* stitched on it. Ellie looked at the back of his neck; red, brown and strained. What's left of his gray hair circled the oily red and freckled bald spot on top of his head when he took off his cap to scratch it. He wore a plaid shirt and crisp, blue jeans. He also wore the sensible brown shoes Ellie's mother bought him five years ago. Everyone else in his truck wore tank tops, shorts, *lava lavas* and flip-flops.

Her dad was thin and spoke with a heavy Portuguese accent and asked "What for?" when Ellie asked him if he wanted to learn Samoan. He sat in the cab of his truck next to Potu who always wanted to learn to drive.

He said, "No you can't drive, you'll just go to Bingo in town."

He pressed his face close to the windshield, looking hard at the road around Tutuila. He ignored everyone who was unbuckled and bouncing in the back of his truck. Ellie looked at Potu through the truck's cab window. She was only a few years older than Ellie. Potu talked and threw her arms around as Rapi sat on her lap with an orange soda. No one was wearing seatbelts because they were ripped out years ago.

"Samoans would laugh at California's strict seat belt laws," Ellie told to her brother back home when he called every few days.

When Manuel ranted about Tavita losing his watch or Rapi spilling his soda, Potu stopped him.

"No problem," she told him and looked at Ellie and winked and smiled.

Ellie thought her dad's vein in his forehead might burst when he was angry.

But there were other times when the eggshell walk didn't hurt her feet so much. He laughed at her jokes and called her "*Tia Chanita*" a Portuguese nickname she had since she was little. It was the one gift he had given her that Vic and her mom didn't have.

Ellie told people Potu was her "father's wife." The image of her mother appeared before her when she sometimes looked at Potu. It was the image of her mother in her wheelchair back in her San Diego house. The heart attack wasn't brought on by any of her chronic illnesses and was unexpected. Ellie didn't know if her mother knew about Potu. Potu made Manuel wait until Ellie's mom died before she would marry him. She wouldn't let him get a divorce and wouldn't let him sell his San Diego house. He would

shuttle every other fishing trip between San Diego and Lau'i'i to spend time with both of his families.

“I’ll tell you all about it,” said Neil, her dad’s friend. Neil introduced Potu to her dad a few years back. *He did have a wife then*, she wanted to say. But the gray-haired Samoan man said he was doing Manuel “a favor.” They used to fish on the same boat and shared months of the same stories. After Ellie’s mom died, Manuel stopped going to the San Diego house all together for several years.

Finally, he brought Potu back to meet his kids.

Ellie’s brother Vic, his wife Delia and their nine-year-old son Albert, lived in the family house after their mother died. Vic was being foreclosed on and lost his job at a law firm for questionable behavior he never really did explain to Ellie, while Delia worked as a nurse. Vic told Ellie he had no desire to *ever* meet Tavita, Rapi or Potu. Vic never wrote or called or spoke to the person he just called “the old man.” He didn’t do the dance like she did. His resentment of his father and the way he treated his mother and the family was as wide as the ocean between California and Samoa.

Ellie was huddled together with so many others in the bed of the truck. Their flip-flopped feet were stretched out and some had their toes over her knees. The ends of her hair stung her face as they drove through the trade winds. She’s thought about how it took such a long time to land at Tafuna Airport to meet Tavita. It took all those years to be able to walk in a preserve with him.

Back at the preserve, they heard tiny birds sing and flutter. She wondered if her mom became a bird when she died because she thought their little songs sounded like opera. Ellie's mom used to sing with a girl's chorale group in Northern California and was the main soloist at her church. That was before her mom married Manuel. Her mom wanted to go to secretarial college in San Francisco and was accepted to a prestigious music conservancy on a scholarship but never went.

"In those days, you got married when you had the chance, just because that's what you did," she told Ellie. She always wanted Ellie to live in New York or Europe. She wanted Ellie to take Russian Literature and Art History in College and become a famous writer.

Ellie thought the small, stout bird now looking them in the preserve was her mother.

They touched more bumpy plants. They drank water from Tavita's bottle. They looked at the valley and ocean shining up at them on the mountain in the middle of nowhere. It's was hot and muggy. Ellie felt almost sunk into the mud and rocks and plants and hadn't been that relaxed in years. She's wasn't afraid of getting bitten by anything like when she hiked in Los Angeles. She didn't think about her stressful job, bills or her cats destroying her new couch. She looked at Tavita's hopeful face and saw the Pacific Ocean with all its strength and wonder. She also saw her dad drunk, and slapping him across the face when he was just being a kid.

"Sometimes Daddy gets mad at me, but that's okay," Tavita smiled. He then said with all the sweetness of the flowers near them, "I'm glad you my sistah."

"Sometimes, when Daddy gets mad at you, that doesn't mean he doesn't love you," Ellie said. "When I was a little girl, Daddy used to yell at me, too. But you are a smart, handsome, kind and wonderful boy and I want you to always remember that."

She squeezed his sticky shoulder. She didn't tell him that her dad also yelled at Vic and her disabled mom. She didn't tell him that Manuel's anger had a lot to do with too many High Balls, too much fishing and sleeping with wide-eyed women in various ports. She didn't mention the violence or when we threatened to slap her mother as she sat in her wheelchair crying.

Ellie sank her shoes in the mud. In her mind she tried to build a canoe and rescue Tavita with words to act as his paddles. She wanted to stay in the peaceful preserve forever and protect Tavita from a future with an uncertain, alcoholic father. She looked at the water bottle dangling from his neck – a giveaway her company tossed out to its customers at community events. She felt the money in her backpack.

She put her hand on his shoulder. They looked below at the *fales* and American-style houses. They saw the boats in the village ports and heard the far-off sounds of choking buses and trucks. The sky was cobalt blue and there was a mist coming off the jagged, forest green edges of Tutuila's tortoise looking back.

She read a book before she came to Samoa that told of its' demographics and the fact that its population had more children than adults. She was fascinated by the Flying Fox that you could only see if you ventured near the volcano.

She thought about how for ten years of his life, she never visited or sent cards. He didn't exist to her.

Maybe I should explain this to him.

She remembered how, when her mother died, Manuel's lives collided. Fifty years of tuna fishing the world, drinking and sleeping with women—barely children themselves — had caught up with him. She thought about her surprise when she found her dad's past involved more than just a few brief affairs and a lot Seagram's.

She thought about the times she never wrote to him, about him staring at the big lonely ocean for months. She also remembered his angry reactions to her grieving curiosity right after her mom died.

She was tired and excited. It was the kind of excitement you feel when you're about to keep going into an intersection after a light has turned red. After you made it, you look for a cop that was hiding and watching. Once you realize no one caught you, you feel free and move along your way, convinced you'd do it the next time too.

“Let's go to Pizza Crazy, and then, let's take the bus to Tafuna?”

“You mean by the airport?” Tavita asks. “Okay.”

They waited on the broken bus bench together listening for the choking bus for more than an hour. She looked at him, playing with a stick in the mud.

What could she tell this beautiful boy?

About a year earlier, after her cousin Michael could no longer deny her questions because fished with her father, Ellie had put pen to paper and told her dad that she loved

him, in spite of his transgressions. Maybe she could finally steer her family's boat in the right direction. Maybe she could scoop Tavita up in a purse seine net and save him from the hard life of a fisherman. Maybe she could gather *all* of them, jump in the net with them. The she could save herself too.

She looked into Tavita's chocolate eyes. She thought about how Manuel showed her the *fales* and tombstones of Tutuila. He prayed at sundown on straw mats, even though he said he was an Atheist. He had horrible arthritis in his knees from the times he fished in the rack off the side of the tuna boat, before they used the purse seine nets. She saw how he relaxed his shoulders when he bounced Rapi in the water.

Her father also loaned villagers money for electric bills and milk. He praised the simple island life that reminded him of the Azores Islands where he was once a 10-year-old boy with chocolate eyes who put rocks in the school locks so the teachers would cancel class while they had to have them repaired.

She also remembered his slaps and his yelling. She remembered the time he put his fist through a wall at home after Vic broken a minor rule and moved when their father ran at him. She remembered Vic's swollen cheek later in the week after her father's aim had improved. She remembered Vic's eyes, red and hurt at only 12.

Tavita looked at Ellie.

"Let's go back now, and I'll take you to Pizza Crazy," she said formulating the plan in her head. Pizza Crazy was his favorite place. It had the worst pizza Ellie had ever

eaten, but still tried to be a tribute to hamburgers and pizza in the land of breadfruit. Every foreigner who has sailed through Pago Pago Harbor had eaten at Pizza Crazy at least once.

They waited for the bus at the broken-down shack. They waited a long time.

If only we could stay here, from the crowds in Pago Pago or the clinking of my dad's ice cubes. I would like to stay here with my 10-year-old part- Portuguese, part Samoan, half-brother for a long, long time.

He looked at Ellie as she was deep in thought.

Finally the bus panted up the hill. It stopped and they paid the 50-cent fare. The riders stared at them, curious where they'd been.

They relaxed.

A breeze blew through the dirty plastic windows. They were hot and sweaty and excited for cardboard pizza.

"Oh no!" Tavita shouted as the bus chocked down the hill.

"My water bottle!"

The driver backed the bus up the hill to the shack. It grunted and moaned.

Never in LA, Ellie thought.

Another passenger, a boy about 15, jumped off the bus and retrieved Tavita's water bottle.

"*Faafetai*," Ellie said and handed him fifty cents. He quickly put each quarter in each ear – the Samoan wallet.

Everyone on the shaky bus looked at them and smiled. The driver pushed the gas. She looked at Tavita. He cradled the water bottle like an injured puppy and smiled.

They stopped at Pizza Crazy. People stared at her when she walked in with Tavita. Even though she had dark hair, her features were different and they could tell was not Samoan but was with this boy who most certainly was. They ordered the “deluxe” pizza – a combination of veggies and mystery meat with something suspiciously tasting like fried bologna.

Tavita is chattered away as he shoved piece after piece in his mouth and drank his soda. She began to feel sad for her father. He would miss this boy far away from him and in Venice Beach with her. She thought of him starting a new school, missing his mom and brother. Venice Beach was not quite as turquoise as the one behind his father’s house and his English was still very broken.

She thought more as he looked at the TV screen above his head.

He’d need to start a year behind in school. She thought of his after-school care. No doubt she’d still need to be at work later hours, but could do some of it at home. Her boss would just have to understand. The money would be tighter, but she might get Vic to help out.

They took the bus marked *Tafuna*. It started to get dark. The bus was filled with cannery and government workers going home after a long day. People stood and others sat on people’s laps. Some smiled at her – an obvious visitor. A few asked Tavita questions in Samoan and he pointed at her and they smiled.

She started to feel anxious. They'll know, she thought. They weren't going toward Lau'i'i.

They'll catch us before we can get in the air.

Earlier she wandered into town and studied the available flights at the travel agency where no one knew her father.

There were only a few flights but one had seats on it. She paid a fortune for them both since it was so last minute. She had made sure to put his birth certificate in her backpack. She took it when her dad and Potu were still at church and found it in the box marked "Important," unlocked and staring up at her.

"Are we going to the movies or McDonalds?" Tavita looked at her and smiled. He only knew Tafuna for three things – the only airport, movie theatre and three fast food places on the island.

"Would you like to visit the U.S.?" Ellie asked him. Her throat lump was getting bigger and she realized this was no longer just a thought. Visions of pictures of her and Tavita on *America's Most Wanted* flashed through her head. Having an alcoholic father was not a defense for kidnapping and wasn't it a felony? Would it be considered an international crime since Samoa was a U.S. territory? She had forgotten to look at up.

"Can Rapi and momma come too?"

The sky turned an ominous gray with rain threatening to fall on them. It would be a warm rain if it did. No need for jackets here.

She knew her dad was already furious with her. It was almost seven and she said they'd be back by five for dinner. He needed to eat early before he started his competitive drinking and watched one week old news on the television.

She didn't say anything as they walked from the bus stop to the airport. Tavita was silent.

There were at the airport with a few others waiting the few hours before the plane would leave.

"Hey, are we picking up Vic?" Tavita asked, dying to meet his mysterious older brother. "Why we here?"

She looked at his face; his innocence. She imagined him crying on the plane. She remembered his friends spear fishing with him the day before. She thought about how Potu would ask him for a kiss on her cheek every time he left the house with her.

"C'mon. I forgot. It's not today."

She led him to one of the taxis lined up for the arriving Hawaiian Air flight that would make the turnaround that night.

"How much back to Lauli'i?" she asked the first taxi driver in line. She looked at Tavita and he smiled at her as it started to rain.

She'd be back next year.

"I think we're late for dinner," Tavita said.

"I'll tell him I took the wrong bus. That it's my fault," Ellie reassured him.

The taxi driver smiled at them both.

The Papaya Palace

Ellie could feel her head bobbing from side to side as she tried to look at the horizon.

There they were, the entire Playa Vista Town Council sitting around the bonfire by the holiday sand sculpture of Santa on a surfboard. And here she was, about to barf.

“Is the pier moving around and do you guys see the sunset moving up and down?” Ellie slurred.

“Okay, here we go. It’s time to go home friend. Why don’t I drive you?”

It was James Mitchell’s soothing, sexy voice. He stood up, and took Ellie’s elbow gently in his hand as she half resisted, trying to navigate getting back into her folding beach chair. Her butt missed the chair and she landed firmly on the sand.

“I don’t need you to drive me Mr. James,” Ellie said stood up again. “I have my car in the parking lot over there,” she said and first pointed to the pier and then, moved her body and pointed her finger dramatically to the pier parking lot.

“It’s a good idea if you drive her James,” said Mike Calhoun, the Playa Vista Town Council president as he lifted his beer to toast Ellie.

“Aye my sweet lassie, but it is sad to see you part ways with us. We’ll see you again fair maiden at tomorrow’s pancake breakfast.”

Ellie looked around at the eight of them, hippies, yuppies, semi-homeless, all woozy, all roasting marshmallows and making s'mores and drinking beer and wine out of red Solo cups.

“Ahhh, don't kid yerselves...you guys iz...or is it are...or am I are...as drunk as me,” she smiled, still dipping and bobbing up and down moving around like a marionette whose left strings had broken. The puppeteer was trying his best to keep her up, but she still swayed side to side.

James patiently held her jacket and purse out to her as she grabbed it. He folded her beach chair and put it under his arm. They walked away from the bonfire and toward his car in the pier parking lot.

Ellie took his arm suddenly filled with the horny possibilities of James Mitchell in her bed. She knew he liked her even though he was living with Michelle. They all did eventually. There wasn't one man on the Town Council who had not blatantly flirted with her. That bumper sticker, *Getting lucky in Playa Beach means going home alone*, was not always true.

“Goobyesuckass,” she said turning around and holding up a shaky hand.

“Bye Ellie, it was fun,” said Irene Heston who let out a big burp almost the size of her 400 pound frame.

“Oh, scuuz you Irene,” Ellie stammered.

James Mitchell took Ellie to his truck and lifted her in. Its truck bed held two large surf boards and enough beer cans for a profitable stop at Billy's Recycling had Billy

not also been at the Town Council bonfire, drunk with the rest of the civically minded that night.

James drove the three blocks to Ellie's apartment and parked in her empty space.

He led her out of the passenger's side like someone leading a blind person without a cane, up to the door of her downstairs unit.

"Ah, here you go Ellie Jelly, glad you had such a great time."

"I'm not smelly."

"I'm just teasing you and I said, 'jelly,' just because it rhymes." He started to sway himself and snorted, burping up some beer in the process.

"Feel free to come in. I have Pictionary – wanna play?"

She tried to lean seductively against the screen door but only managed to knock down the hanging spider plant her mom said was bad luck to have in her apartment.

"Stupid Portuguese superbitions," she said as she looked down at the pot, broken near her flip-flopped foot.

"No, no, I have to go. You rest."

"Your loss Jamie. And I mean, it's a *big* loss. Peekshunary isn't the only game I know how to play."

Ellie leaned closer to James.

She dropped her keys twice before he picked them up from her and jiggled the front door. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and turned her toward the door. Once she stepped in, he shut the door behind her. She heard running steps out to his truck, his engine turn on and him speeding away.

Ellie made it to the bathroom before she threw up – but missed the toilet. The world was still hoola-hooping around her and Brenda wasn't home to help her stand upright.

"I'm gonna nap and then go back," she said falling into bed, feeling something chunky in her hair but not removing it. It felt like large rocks were on her eyelids.

"I love you Jamie."

Her eyeballs met darkness.

The next morning she heard Brenda saying "gross."

"Ellie, did you barf on the bathroom wall? Can you please clean that up? I'm going to work now. Oh and some guy named Fred said you left your earrings in his RV on Thursday night. He called last night."

Ellie grunted from her bed.

"Okay, bye."

"She's always miss perfect that one," Ellie said and put her pillow on her forehead.

Brenda worked as a microbiologist at the hospital so she was often gone during most of Ellie's hangovers. Their roommate situation worked out perfectly because Ellie wasn't home at night when Brenda was.

While Ellie was making out on the cliffs with some rugby player she'd met at Dave's Bar or playing pool with an Australian guy at the Sunset Saloon, Brenda was doing needlework or at Catholic Mass or reading a mystery novel.

Ellie slept a few more hours and then got up to pee.

The bathroom smelled awful and, always the practical one, Brenda had left a bucket and bottle of Lysol on the floor.

“Okay, Queen Obvious,” Ellie sneered looking at herself in the mirror.

Mascara ran down her face and there was a white chunk of something protruding out of her dark matted hair. She felt it and realized it was a marshmallow.

“Gross,” she said as she lifted the marshmallow out of her hair.

It all came back to her now. She was having a marshmallow eating contest with Scott Woods at the fire ring. He was a law school student and on the Town Council with her. They had sex in her Corolla the week before, after the meeting. He was smart and funny and really well hung and up for the occasional quickie after the meeting. He was also married with two small kids.

“I bet you can’t catch this marshmallow in your bathing suit,” Ellie had teased him, happy his wife and kids had left the Holiday Fair a few hours earlier. She threw a marshmallow toward his bulging swim trunks. It had only taken Ellie a few meetings to capture him with her low cut sweater and dangling earrings. She made a point to put on lipstick on her big Portuguese lips when he sat next to her – and he always sat next to her. She would pass him the agenda and make sure their hands touched. She made sure she would catch his eye when smoothing her sweater down. She could tell he was hard by the Pledge of Allegiance.

The night after a particularly long meeting with a Boy Scout troop and Planning Board presentations, she followed him into the bathroom stall at the rec center, where their meetings took place.

She pushed him against the stall, kissing him hard.

“It’s too bad you’re married,” she said and stomped off.

She saw the brown, white and yellow barf on the wall behind the toilet, remnants of the hot dogs and beer from the night before too. It was less dramatic than the week before when she had flushed her tampons down the toilet even though Old Lady Conlin had told her not to. She had clogged up the line badly. But Brenda was a good sport about it. They pretended that one of their visiting friends had done it.

That’s what Ellie loved about Brenda. No matter how many guys called their answering machine looking for Ellie, no matter how many boyfriends or “just met” friends she had over in her bedroom or on top of on the couch, Brenda tolerated it all.

“Whenever I think of bowing out of something or am too chicken, I ask myself, ‘what would Ellie do?’ and then get the courage to do it,” Brenda told her friends who just shook their heads.

They were friends since ninth grade. Brenda was the reliable one who always balanced her checkbook to the penny and had \$4,000 in savings when Ellie was always negative. It was the eighties and oat bran was the rage. Brenda dutifully made oat bran muffins on Saturdays and sometimes spaghetti when Ellie came home from her proofing job at a publishing company. She’d walk in the door and Brenda would be stirring

homemade spaghetti sauce. The table was set with a white vase with daisies and sometimes even cloth napkins.

“And I’m dating all these losers who can’t even afford a pizza when maybe you and I should switch to the other team,” Ellie would joke.

“Well, we aren’t animals,” Brenda said, putting the salad down.

“Come to Sunset Saloon later Brenda, Cliff’s band is playing.”

“I don’t know how you do it – I can’t stay out so late on a work night – let alone go visit some random guy’s RV.”

Brenda smiled at her but it wasn’t a real smile.

“He wasn’t just a random guy. I’ll have you know he was an *alderman* from Canada driving to Baja,” Ellie said taking a bite of spaghetti.

“Don’ you ever want a real relationship with someone who’s *available*? I don’t know...I think of the kids and big van and a dad who’s going to be their soccer coach. It kind of sounds nice.”

“Do you really believe all that crap? I don’t. Men are cheating assholes,” Ellie said looking through the mail.

“Why would I want to marry my dad anyway? I hear his latest is in Panama. I wonder what happened to the one he met in Saipan. Her grandfather was Haile Selassie, you know – that guy who was the Emperor of Ethiopia.”

“Wow, is that true?”

“Well, let’s put it this way – my Portuguese father with his eighth-grade education would never know about the Emperor of Ethiopia if his new girlfriend hadn’t mentioned it. She did give him some tortoise hair combs for me.”

“Are you sure she’s his girlfriend?”

“They all are,” Ellie said, she stood up and went to the refrigerator.

“Wine?”

She moved past the Tupperware containers with Brenda’s lunches for the week. Her bottle of Vodka was in the back.

“Ahhh, now here’s some magic.”

Brenda twirled her spaghetti and looked down.

“You know my cousin Brian?”

“The cute one?”

“Yes. I guess he was drinking a lot and started to go to AA and now is sober and really likes it...”

“Well, I’ll toast to him,” Ellie held up her vodka filled jam jar.

Brenda had started to collect jam jars as something quaint and they started to use them for glasses. She seemed to care more than Ellie did about the fact that the apartment had knotty pine kitchen cabinets and quaint yellow kitchen curtains.

The phone rang.

“Hello, ahhh yes, she’s here, and can I tell her whose calling...”

“Thanks,” Ellie said and grabbed the phone.

“Hi...oh Scott...well I’m going to hear Cliff’s band, wanna come?”

Ellie talked to Scott while Brenda did the dishes.

Later, when she was getting ready, Brenda stood outside the bathroom and watched her.

“Isn’t Scott *married?*”

That night, she danced with Scott, made out with Cliff in between his band’s sets and drank shots with a South African ostrich meat broker named Shaun who had just moved to Playa Beach. His South African accent made her wet.

The next day she woke up to the shower running. Ellie looked around and couldn’t remember where she was. She was in a strange bed with panties around her ankles. The rest of her was naked. Her bra and panties were on the floor but she didn’t remember having sex. A wallet was on a chair next to her purse.

Her groin ached and she felt like she’d been run over.

She looked around, got up and found her clothes. She grabbed the wallet for an ID. It was the ostrich meat broker. The shower was still going strong.

She felt a greasy feeling in her stomach. Her throat started to tighten. Her breaths were shortening and she felt the urge to run. She slowly and carefully put her clothes back on.

She went out the door, and closed it quietly. She had no idea what street she was on but relieved to find her car outside the condo. It was parked halfway on the sidewalk

and in the street with a ticket on the windshield. She realized she was a few blocks from her apartment.

“Please be in my purse,” she said looking for her keys.

“She took her keys out and put them in the ignition, almost running into the fire hydrant as she pulled out.

A wave of fear came toward her.

Had she been raped?

She tried to piece the night together but it was a blur of shots, kisses, hugs, lips, thighs, laughter, sweat and pounding music. And more shots.

She felt like she’d swallowed a cotton ball.

She called in sick for the third time that month.

“You’re not going to work?” Brenda’s usually upbeat tone felt judgmental to Ellie.

“I’m sick,” Ellie said and ran to the bathroom to throw up.

“Feel better. I’m going for a run.”

Brenda sounded mad.

Ellie took two showers and stayed in bed that day. She could only bring herself to eat Saltines as her stomach did high jumps.

When she heard his voice on the answering machine, she felt terror. She didn’t answer the phone when the others called either. Her fear and anxiety were choking.

Ellie's mother called to ask if she could help with a family dinner on Sunday. Her dad was back from fishing. She didn't answer that either.

Ellie was numb as she helped clear plates, pours wine and ignored their conversations. She skipped the usual high ball she shared with her father to welcome him home even when he insisted.

Her gut was a hollow gave.

Her aunt, uncle and assorted other relatives ate *couves* and sweet bread. She could barely keep her water down. She watched her father drink more and more and heard his voice get louder and louder. What started out as a pleasant family meal turned in to cold, bitter yelling when the relatives went home and she helped her mom with the dishes.

"I don't know why you don't have a drink with me, you too good for your old man? And what are *you* looking at? I don't need this shit when I come home."

Drinking did not make him the gracious host it made Ellie.

Her father gulped his ninth or tenth drink as he walked out of the kitchen.

"I wish he'd just go back to his girlfriend," her mom mumbled. "Wow, some welcome home! And what the hell is wrong with you tonight?"

"I don't feel well, thanks for dinner,"

Ellie kissed her mom on the cheek and looked around.

"I think everything's done. And good luck with him."

"He'll sleep it off. He always does. But does he always have to ruin my dinners?"

Ellie hugged her mom gently, a gesture she didn't do much.

"It'll get better," she said and kissed her on the cheek.

As she drove home she wondered who she was trying to convince.

That next Tuesday, The Playa Beach Town Council convened at The Papaya Palace for their “after meeting” meeting. The Papaya Palace was a tacky bar with 80-year old regulars who had their own stools and also popular with the college crowd for its sixties décor.

Selma could be found at her perch at the end of the bar, drinking and smoking her unfiltered cigarettes. She went to the same hair salon as Ellie’s mother. She sat staring at her drink, hacking a hairball from her gut.

Ellie sat with five of the council members squeezed into a sticky vinyl booth. Laughter from the other patrons washed over the bar like the waves at the beach down the street. Cigarette smoke circled up to the ceiling. The table was Plexiglas with neon plastic fish under it in a sea scene she thought must have been pretty twenty years before. There were neon mermaids someone with drawn on nipples on the wall and octopus draped in dusty fish nets. The wall clock had crabs where the numbers were supposed to be. The bathrooms were marked “Wahine” and “Kane.” Charlie and Kenny, the bartenders who had been there for more than 25 years, wore the same Hawaiian shirts every night as they poured libations into chipped clamshells and coconut shaped glasses. Elvis sang Blue Hawaii from a juke box under the din of laughter, talking and coughing.

Ellie sat and drank diet coke much to the dismay of her friends at the bar.

“You seem sad sweetie, what’s up?” Irene asked. She sat next to her and put her large arm around her.

“I’m okay, just got a lot going on with work,” Ellie lied. “Proofing boring directories is so exciting and they keep upping our page count each day.

”Have some of my whiskey sour, it’ll help.”

“Not this time Irene, excuse me. I have to go to the bathroom.”

Ellie walked through the Wahine door and locked it. She looked at herself in the cracked mirror. At 31, she had large bags under her eyes and her olive skin, once glowing, was now sallow and puffy. She was still petite and considered very attractive, but the whites of her eyes were red and yellow. She looked at her neck and noticed an aging yellow bruise.

Where had she gotten that?

She studied it closely. It looked like a hand mark on her windpipe.

She was confused. Had he tried to choke her or was it just rough sex?

Her groin still throbbed and she noticed another bruise on her waist, a purple cloud growing.

She sat on the toilet, put her head in her hands and started to sob. She didn’t know how much time had passed before she heard a knock at the door.

“Ellie, are you in there? Are you okay?”

It was Irene.

She didn’t answer.

Two weeks later she sat with a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee St. Mary’s Catholic Church in the Parish Hall with the other members of Harmony Group. There were 20 of

them – short, fat, old, homeless, professional – and a surfer Adonis she was trying hard not to stare at.

Ellie wasn't as shaky as the first few days. When she got home, she called the Suicide Hotline but was put on hold.

“You're an alcoholic,” a voice said through the darkness of her small kitchen as she sat at the table, phone still in hand. She hung up on the hotline and looked up Alcoholics Anonymous in the phone book.

The man on the other end of the phone listened to her cry, talk and try and catch her breath all at the same time.

“I uhhhhh I need *help*.”

Evelyn was the woman who called her back. They talked from midnight to 2 a.m. She mostly just cried and Evelyn listened.

“I don't want to be like my dad or my grandfathers who are drunks. I don't want to be an alcoholic,” she said. She was relieved Brenda was working an overnight shift.

“I don't want to get my hair done every week to sit and smoke on a bar stool at The Papaya Palace.”

One year later, Evelyn presented Ellie with a cake for her AA birthday. Ellie blew out the candle and gave Evelyn a huge hug. Brenda and Irene clapped loudly in the audience and drank coffee that tasted like mud with powdered creamer.

“My name's Ellie and I am an alcoholic...”

Bringing Dad to Savai'i

Ellie thought of him in the blackness of the cargo hold, with all the jiggling suitcases and yappy little dogs in their carriers. Her dad was next to the long boards those guys in the back of the plane brought. They were drinking mai tais and thinking about their Samoan surfing safaris.

She was thinking of his box moving around.

Her legs ached and she felt her head growing with sinus pressure.

“Would you like anything to drink love?” a pretty flight attendant interrupted her thoughts.

Ellie wanted to join the surfers with their mai tais but ordered a diet coke instead. The last thing she needed was to drink on this journey. It was what had landed him in the cargo hold and what would put him in the ground.

They finally landed on Upolu a little after dawn. The sweltering air hit her in the eyeballs. Her contacts were dry, her throat sore and her head throbbed.

She blankly went through the foreign immigration line with the hand full of Americans, New Zealanders and Australians. It wasn't her first trip to the country and she knew the drill. The line for travelers with Samoan passports was long. Aunties, uncles, cousins and babies waited patiently to see their *aigas*.

She knew if she opened her mouth too soon, her eyes would become like ceiling sprinklers set off by smoke. She stood quietly wishing the only baggage she had was a box of gifts from the states.

She handed their passports to the man at the immigration desk. He looked behind her, expecting someone.

“My dad’s in the big box in the cargo hold,” Ellie told the handsome Samoan with his green *lava lava*, Tommy Bahama-style shirt and flip-flops. Ali’itama was on his nametag.

He nodded kindly like this was a daily occurrence, landing with a body.

“They told me you’d need his passport and death certificate.”

“Oh, you show the certificate to the man, but you want me stamp his passport one last time?”

“I guess.” Ellie shrugged.

She looked at his passport stamps. *Africa, Costa Rica, Solomon Islands, New Zealand, Panama, Portugal* and everywhere in between. He fished around the globe, drinking his vodkas and sevens and sleeping with wide-eyed women.

His journeys weren’t without their surprises for her. When she was six, she had an unpleasant encounter with a llama at the San Diego Zoo that chewed her hair, causing a loud crying spell. He traveled to Peru and brought her back llama slippers and she felt vindicated.

Her dad laughed at her with those fuzzy gray slippers and she smiled.

He laughed a lot back then. He smiled a lot too. Everyone liked Manuel Madruga.

Through the years, he ran the *Maria Jeanette*, the *Barbara Jean* and the *Explorer* tuna fishing boats. He was a good chief engineer – always fair and he treated the crews right. The boats were bigger through the years too. And so was the money. Good stuff for a man with barely an eighth grade education that put rocks in the school door locks so Sister Ana couldn't unlock the schoolhouse.

He dreamed of America as a boy in his village of *Calheta de Nesquim* on the island of Pico in the Portuguese Azores. Life was pleasant enough – but he dreamt of gold streets like every other immigrant in 1949.

He boarded a ship with Tio Joao and waited in the lice lines at Ellis Island.

He didn't know much English and joined Tio Joao at his big house in San Diego. Tio Joao owned boats and paid Amelia Rodrigues to “marry” Manuel on paper because of the quotas on *Portagees* back then.

She was 60. He was 15. He never met her. It was annulled after a few years.

Ellie found the divorce papers in a drawer after her mother died. It was to be the first in a long string of her father's secrets.

Her dad went right to work as a teenager in America. He was slight but strong. He fished with bamboo poles off a rack on the side of the tuna boat with his uncle and cousins. He dragged in 150-pound blue fin tuna. He was a three-and four-pole man – joining other crewmembers in a symphonic dance catching fish after fish, hauling them in over their heads together as the waves crashed on them.

Then he left the racks and starting running the engine room. His began to lose his hearing but he liked the job. He made good money, owned his own house and liked the

crews and lifestyle. The two-month trips were long but his kids – at least when they were little – were always happy to see him come home. When he starting fishing out of the Western Pacific in the eighties, he'd be gone for five months sometimes and spend much more time in Samoa.

Ellie moved past security and the baggage handlers to the “oversized luggage” area. There he was in the white box, with the surfboards and contraband boxes of smelly fish and all the baby strollers. *So many baby strollers*, she thought.

“We wait for the man to come,” another airport official told her and pretty soon everyone in the small Samoan airport knew her story.

She was Ellie from the states, traveling with her dead Portuguese father who would be buried in their soil. They workers smiled pleasantly at her. She was exhausted and holding back tears. Her legs felt shaky.

Ellie looked around for her stepmother Potu. She wasn't there yet. It was typical. She was never anywhere on time – why would she be there to greet her dead husband and stepdaughter?

There was first a service at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in San Diego.

Potu's Western Samoan passport had expired so she couldn't go see Manuel when he clung to life support in the hospital, up to the states for medical care. Ellie had convinced Vic to bring him from Samoa. She knew too many Samoans who died early

deaths in the islands hospital with its inadequate medical supplies and corrupt administrators.

Ellie took pictures of the party after the St. Andrew's service to show Potu what she'd missed.

Ellie's late mother had insisted on becoming a Lutheran after much disillusionment with the Catholics. She died a Lutheran and had a Lutheran service.

Now Ellie's dad – who didn't believe in *any* God –Lutheran or Catholic -would have a service there too.

In fact, her dad had many prayers said for him. Coming up from Samoa, he landed in a hospital at his sister's urging. It was there that the priest delivered his Last Rites.

Ellie's friend Barbara put him on her Born-Again church's prayer chain.

The Methodists at his Samoan church in Lau'i'i prayed for him.

Even Ellie's Jewish friends said prayers from the Torah.

"If he doesn't get into Heaven at this point, there's a real problem," Ellie joked to her brother Vic who needed the humor as he vacillated with her about taking Manuel off life support.

Ellie stayed at her cousin Tina's house for the week to avoid the drive from her house in LA to the hospital.

One night, Ellie snuck out of Tina's house to sit by her dad in ICU. It was late and the unit was dark and the only sounds were beeping IV monitors, humming computer screens and his struggling breaths.

His diseased organs were failing him. He was in a coma, and was agitated.

Ellie sat and rubbed his shoulder, speaking softly, not knowing what else to do.

“I’m here dad. It’s okay.”

She just kept rubbing his shoulder because she didn’t know what else to do.

She looked around the room and saw the poster with the little girl on it. The girl had her finger pressed to her lips. “Respect Patient Confidentiality,” it said.

The little girl looked like Ellie when she got the llama slippers. Warm tears threatened to fall from her cheeks but she quickly wiped them away and patted her father’s cold shoulder.

Ellie looked at the girl. She listened to his struggling breaths. The room smelled like antiseptic. It was so quiet. There was a hum like the one from a fish tank. The lights were dim and the nurse at the ICU station was reading a novel under a reading lamp.

Ellie closed her eyes and remembered a time when she was the only dark-haired little girl at St. Andrews. Most of the people who went there were blond-haired, blue-eyed Norwegians. Ellie was asked to play the Virgin Mary for a video. She was ten and got to ride a real donkey and hold a real baby who was supposed to be Jesus. Ellie liked St. Andrew’s.

Maria Elena, Ellie’s mother, relished being around WASP-y women who baked casseroles and were married to doctors and lawyers. Her mother worked with them on the church’s cookbook because she was an excellent cook herself. Her mother had a promising life in the San Francisco Bay before she married her father, the tuna fisherman.

Ellie thought of her mother's losses every time she said "no" to a marriage proposal. She had been asked three times. Those decisions left her single at 38.

Ellie and her brother Vic organized the service at St. Andrew's for their father. More than a hundred people came. Of course, they were mostly family, co-workers and friends of Ellie, Vic and Johnny who was out fishing.

There they were; black, white, Lesbian, Gay, Portuguese, Samoan, Norwegian, Mexican, Italian. Even the "Diversity Group" that Ellie served on at work stopped by. The showing was remarkable since her dad hadn't lived in the states for 25 years. And he never stopped saying "colored," when talking about her mother's caretaker.

And if Ellie had tried to explain it to him, he would have said, "What the hell is a diversity group?"

At the service in San Diego, Vic convinced his nieces and nephews to say a Samoan prayer that thrilled the crowd. They thought it was a beautiful tribute to their grandfather.

Only Ellie, Vic and Sia, their cousin Johnny's Samoan wife, knew it was their daily prayer they said every night before dinner.

Johnny, who fished with their father at one time, was close to him. He and his wife lived in Las Vegas and their children were forgetting much of their Samoan. But there they were at the funeral service thanking God for their daily bread while WASP-y ladies wiped their eyes.

Now Ellie was in Samoa to bury him for good. There would also be several services with new tears and tributes.

Ellie's mind came back to the airport as she saw Potu with Willy, Ellie's 14-year-old half-brother. She hugged them soundly.

"Oh Ellie, I'm so sorry you wait and I'm so happy you come," Potu wiped her warm face and eyes with a sweat rag.

"You bring daddy with you? Where's he at?" Willy asked her matter-of-factly.

Ellie wiped her eyes as she talked.

"He's there in the box. He had a nice trip," Ellie told them.

She looked behind to see the typical entourage of cousins, children, and villagers. Potu introduced the ones she didn't already know and they all hugged her, one by one.

"We wait for the man to come from the funeral home," Potu explained, sitting on a bench with her.

"Another man to come," Ellie thought.

As was the custom in Samoa, hours would pass while everyone waited for the "man to come."

"It's a national pastime," Ellie once joked to Vic, after her seventh trip to Samoa. "There are three types of time in the world -- Hawaiian time, Baja time and then -- the mother of all stolen hours -- Samoan time."

It was evident when she traveled to another island to rent a car.

"We wait for him to come back from the other island," said the wife were the man rented cars out of his yard.

“We call the man to come,” said the lady at the car repair shop after the rented car broke down.

It had been a ten-hour flight. Ellie’s wait for Potu was another hour. Then, they waited to release her father’s body to the “man” from the mortuary.

“More waiting for the man,” Ellie said under her breath.

She saw his blue truck drive to the back of the oversized luggage entrance. He arrived three hours after the flight landed.

Tele P. Fainonu of the *Ligaliga Fusi & Sons Funeral Services* was there to pick up Manuel.

When he shook her hand, Ellie felt relieved and calm.

Ellie rode in the truck with Tele. Her dad was in the wooden box in his truck bed.

Potu, Willy and the assorted relatives and villagers followed in a caravan of rusty, noisy cars.

They headed to Leififi, Apia on the island of Upolu to put Manuel in his royal blue coffin. Potu’s nephew Vai bought it. He owed her father a favor and drove a bright red, new Mazda truck. He worked for the bank and was the only one of Potu’s relatives who seemed to have a regular income.

She liked Tele right away. For the half-hour drive from the airport to his mortuary, explained to her about death and burial customs in the islands.

“We don’t like when you burn the people,” Tele explained with his soft voice and slight New Zealand accent. He told her he’d lived there for several years before returning

to Upolu to help his brother run the mortuary. He was also a prize-winning body builder from several Pacific Islander Games. At 51, he was still in fighting shape.

The talked and laughed awkwardly. He asked why Ellie was not married or with a house full of kids but in a way she found polite.

She had no acceptable Samoan answer.

“We think you don’t respect your daddy if you light him on fire. It is good and right that you have come,” he said. “We are the only mortuary in Samoa that has the certificate to keep the bodies fresh ...what do you call it...”

“Embalming?” Ellie offered.

“Yes, that’s what it is called.”

Luckily Manuel was embalmed before the plane ride and this was his trip to get his casket.

Still, she was worried about the Samoan heat.

She was relieved to be in the air-conditioned truck without the weeping relatives. She could put on her reporter’s cap and learn all there about burying someone here. There were no faces, only bodies now and customs and understanding and doing her duty.

Tele’s quiet knowledge soothed her.

“Just bury me in the front yard like the rest of the Samoans,” her dad told her a few years before this truck ride. He was referring to the tradition of burying relatives on the family land. When he said this, they were sitting in his little “Samoa House” next to his regular house in Lauli’i in American Samoa. It was *fale* style with open walls and

columns as opposed to his American-style house next door. It was where her dad went to read the *Samoa News* with his high ball every night. When she visited every other year, she would join him in his “Samoa House.” They sat quietly in the soft breezes from the evening waves.

If she could catch him in the half hour between the first sips, their conversations would be good, almost warm.

If she joined him after he hit too many ice cubes with the rock by the freezer to throw into his glass, bitterness and anger might rise up in his body.

She walked on delicate robin’s eggs. If she weren’t careful, his words would become darts. He could become mad at everything and everyone. This included her brother, Potu, the kids, the government, and the lady in the center of the village.

If she was in firing range, he was mad at her too. She talked too much, asked too many questions, and didn’t spend her money right.

It was the other things he didn’t say that also left her afraid.

She could get a glimpse of what he thought every so often by something her cousin Johnny would let innocently slip out.

She was a spoiled daughter, self-serving and too involved in her single life.

She was odd for never waving the Portuguese flag of marriage and kids.

She thought she knew too much by going to college and being a “big cheese” at her job.

Johnny fished with her dad for years and the two had an alcohol-fueled love/hate relationship as stormy as the Pacific.

But when she was looking for aspirin for her dad's headache, she also found newspaper clippings of the articles she'd written as a freelance writer. They were in a box with her letters, cards and pictures. He'd written, "Do Not Move or Touch" on it.

It had been her dad's decision to be buried in Samoa and not the Azores.

It would have been much cheaper to snap a seat belt on an urn and fly him down in ashes. Instead, here she was with his body riding in a truck to the ferry.

They came to the landing. They would sit in the car and ride the Samoan Queen across the ocean between Upolu and Savai'i. There Tele would drop him off at *Sefo's Funeral Services, We're Here to Help*, to wait for his burial.

The gentle rocking in the hull of the ferry put everyone around them to sleep. Ellie looked at Tele who was also dozing off. She looked at Potu in the car behind them with Willy and the others.

"Ahh, the spontaneous Samoan nap," she thought.

Her 21-year old half-brother Tavita would join them when Vic arrived from the States. He was waiting with other relatives to meet Vic in American Samoa. Vic had insisted on going to the funeral of a distant relative, delaying Manuel's burial by a week.

Ellie tried to resist shutting her eyes. She drifted between thought and sleep, moving back and forth between the two like the ferry.

It was okay to nap here in the Polynesian sun and one of the many things she found charming about her dad's island paradise. Everyone rested in the heat of midday. It was a break from their dawn chores.

She thought about the village and could picture it in her semi-lucent state.

At dawn the people in her father's village would carry water from wells, scrub *fale* floors, go spear fishing or help sleepy children off to school with a delightful routine of morning prayers and singing birds.

There was cooking in the cookhouse, sewing on old machines, sweeping with Samoan brushes. There were also the Sunday services and church cleanings, *fia fias* and other family obligations. There was always something that needed to get done in the stifling heat.

But in the midday, you'd see people resting, unashamed on mats, in their open *fales*, on the grass, at bus stops.

Other odd thoughts clouded her mind.

Samoans never sweat, she thought. Ellie learned the hard way not to wear silk blouses in the tropics because *she* sweat profusely.

She could hear Tele's snoring become louder.

Her thoughts roamed, wide as the ocean expanse before them. The tourists drank fruity drinks by poolside, but the average Samoan – especially the women -- had difficult daily routines.

In the states, Ellie paid someone to clean her house every week. And, she rarely cooked, opting to microwave instead or eat out.

Ellie was exhausted and appreciated the silence. She lifted her eyes open. She looked back at her dad's royal blue coffin.

“Ellie talks too much,” her dad used to joke but also said it with a bit of pride. She was friendly, approachable and funny – a trait inherited from her mom.

Manuel knew folks all around these islands and in California. Before he became a bitter old man, he was also known for kindness and sense of humor.

But now, she had a slight fear of him in the back of Tele’s truck. She could still feel his disapproval on her neck.

When did he change? she wondered.

She remembered his olive green fishing bag filled with his shoes and his clothes for his fishing trips.

One Christmas, she didn’t think he’d make it home in time. She was six and dressed in her new nightgown. She was watching a *Charlie Brown Christmas* on their large Magnavox with her brother, sprawled out on the carpet in her flannel red nightgown sprinkled with snowflakes. Their mom was making peanut blossoms in the kitchen. The Christmas tree was lit up. Dozens of presents shone up at her with sparkling promise.

All was right with the world, except she missed her daddy.

Then, she saw it! A shadowy figure outside the living room window and holding a giant bag.

“It’s Santa,” she told Vic pointing at the window. He looked up.

“No it’s not -- you dummy -- it’s daddy!”

Vic ran to the door in his reindeer pajamas. He opened it to find Manuel, with his big sack of clothes and boots, smelling of cigarettes. He grinned from a tanned face that still smelled of salty air.

“Ho, ho, ho,” he laughed and hugged them.

He picked up Ellie.

Her mom came out from the kitchen laughing and wiping her hands on a festive holiday apron.

“*Aye Jesus*,” she said. “Look what Santa brought you kids – your daddy.”

She and Manuel hugged and kissed.

It was a wonderful Christmas that year.

Her head was pounding and she cursed her brother Vic for delaying his trip while he went to another funeral in the states. Vic was like her grandfather in that respect, he attended everyone’s funerals. If the dead person was his co-worker’s brother’s gardener, he’d be there in a suit, giving condolences to the family. It was his overly considerate nature that she both appreciated and found inconvenient.

“I need to go mow Mr. Murphy’s lawn before I meet you at the restaurant,” he’d say. Or, “Mrs. Souza needs a ride to her doctor’s and then I’ll help you get the possum out of your garage.”

Vic was extraordinarily helpful – the result of not reading the self-help books Ellie read. She also faithfully attended Al-Anon meetings to learn to “detach with love.”

And, she was sober for 10 years in AA.

“I think God has a recliner, a Pepsi and Butterfingers set up for you in heaven for all your good deeds,” she’d tease Vic.

He was also a hero in Manuel’s eyes and the son who could do no wrong.

But he wouldn't be here for a week and she was worried her dad would melt in the tropical heat. She read somewhere that the first part of the human body to go is nose cartilage. She was sure her father's nose was shifting when she saw him transferred from his box to the coffin.

The boat docked at Salelologa Harbor on Savai'i. Their car guided off the ferry first after the giant walls went down.

Heads bowed as the crew recognized Tele and knew he carried precious cargo. He made the journey many times.

"They show sign of respect," Tele told her.

She watched as families stopped moving to let them drive past and drivers of other cars waited patiently behind them.

It was either the heat, or the sight of shirtless Samoan children bowing respectfully that caused Ellie to wipe her face with the sweat rag Potu had given her. The lump in her throat was no longer just from a sinus infection.

Sefo's Funeral Services We Are Here to help mortuary was a disaster. What Tele's funeral home featured in comfort and cleanliness, Sefo's was the exact opposite. But, it was the only place on that side of Savai'i so there were no other choices for Potu and Ellie.

Sefo himself came out from a back room in a filthy shirt with some type of knife. Ellie thought she saw blood on it. He looked like Kaddafi with frizzy, unkempt hair and a mean face. It was like a bad Wes Craven film.

Tele had a worried look as he spoke in Samoan to him while Potu kept reassuring Ellie that “everything is going to be okay.”

After some discussion, Ellie’s dad was placed in a room with a humming, rusty fan.

“Be sure you put him in air conditioning,” Tele had told her on the ferry. “It’s no good for fan because he will melt.”

When she asked about it at Sefo’s, Tele reluctantly told her, “This man say he has fan and other machine is broke. It’ll be okay.”

Ellie thought she would cry when they lifted her dad’s coffin from the truck and Tele drove away. She would never see the kind man again.

“It couldn’t get any worse,” She thought.

But it did.

A dog limped by her with the most horrible infected leg she had ever seen. She tried not to gag.

Potu put her arm around her, mistaking disgust with grief.

“We wait for Vic and we visit Daddy here, you no worry. We come by and we visit and take pictures and we change his clothes every day.”

“We what?!”

They were ready to leave and Ellie slammed the rusty car door on Potu’s cousin’s husband’s old Toyota. She had to shut the door twice for it to stick.

They left her father at Sefo’s to wait to be put in the ground.

They drove back to Saletagaloa, Potu's family's village in the larger village of Salelologa not far from the wharf.

Manuel and Potu lived on Tutuila in American Samoa but the island of Savai'i was Potu's homeland and where her ancestors were buried. She would bury her husband there now too.

Ellie just wanted sleep. She could not calculate how many days she had been without it. Instead she found herself sitting cross-legged on a fine mat in the village *fono fale*. She listened to the pastor, the Talking Chief, and the *Matai* who was also her adopted uncle. They sang, prayed and cried out Samoan burial rituals for Manuel Souza.

At one point in his 25 years in Samoa, Manuel was up to be some sort of chief for his village.

"But Dad's not Samoan," Ellie questioned Potu.

"No matter, he pays the man the money, he make the party," Potu told her.

When Ellie asked Manuel about it, he shook his head in mock disgust.

"Ahhh, they just want me to give them more money," he said. "Remember when Potu's cousin wanted to name her baby after you? They just did it for the presents you sent them."

Ellie's illusion was burst. She guessed it was true and with each visit was more convinced.

But no matter how much money she let her father's neighbor borrow for her child's medical care (Bingo) or Potu's brother to get his car fixed (beer) she still had a deep love for these people with the kind brown eyes.

When she saw her dad give gum to the kids at church, or stop and talk to 89-year-old Beseta, the lady who walked from village to village, Ellie was sure Manuel loved them too.

“This is going to cost me and Vic a lot of money before it’s over,” she thought as she looked around. She knew that she was to pay the pastor, the Matai, the women’s group and others for the ceremonies that were to take place.

Payment was always accepted whether in Samoan *tala* or American dollars. Samoans were proud, hardworking people, but it was still in a developing country where they didn’t have much and relied mostly on the land and sea.

Still, they’d give you their last breadfruit; make beautiful shell necklaces for you and load your suitcases with canned tuna if they worked at Star-Kist, even if you insisted you could buy the same cans back in California.

Ellie wore floral *lava lava* around her waist that Potu had quickly given her. She had also stuck a red plumeria behind Ellie’s ear. She smiled and bowed her head with the rest of them after they kissed her on each cheek.

“How will I get through this?”

She looked around the darkened fale, heard the elders praying, the villagers singing softly in harmony as the night wind blew through the *fale’s* open walls. She thought she saw a shadow in the darkness – a figure watching the scene.

Her heart jumped into her throat.

She looked back and realized it was just a palm tree swaying drowsily in the tropical breeze.

The trips to Sefo's were numerous. Potu wanted to talk and kiss Manuel, as was the custom. There he was out of his coffin and on a table in his blue jogging suit and white socks. It was the outfit Ellie's cousin Cathy bought Manuel at the Target. When Vic brought Manuel up, all he had was a sad, small suitcase filled with shorts and floral shirts.

It was even cold in California in February.

He died before he could use the warmer clothes Cathy bought him.

Ellie thought it fitting for those to be his "traveling clothes" back to Samoa.

Now at Sefo's, Potu put him in new clothes each day. Someone put a *San Diego Padres* baseball cap on his baldhead. His skin was jaundice and he didn't move, but he looked fairly content as he was turned and patted and his clothes were smoothed out. Villagers took their pictures with him and cried and kissed his forehead.

Little Manuel, who was five and named after her father because little Manuel's dad fished with him, came to visit. He kissed Manuel's dead cheek and yelled, "Manu, Manu!" in frustration. He shook his shoulder to try and wake him up until his mother pushed his hand away.

Little Manuel was slow but knew something was wrong when Manuel didn't wake up and give him his usual M&Ms. Little Manuel lived next door and in spite of Manuel's drinking and increasing bad moods, the two were buddies.

Each day before school, Little Manuel would saunter over and knock on Manuel's screen door.

"Manu, manu, m's," he'd say between his dimples.

"Ahhhh," Manuel would fake exasperation. "Go on, get outta here little guy," he'd say and pretend to give him a swat on his behind.

Little Manuel would walk away laughing, with his hand already grabbing the melting M&Ms out of the bag.

Ellie took the child by the hand and out of the stuffy room.

They went to the edge of the grass outside Sefo's to watch the ocean.

"Ellie's sad," she said and brought her fingers down her cheeks like tears. "Little Manuel is sad too?"

The boy looked up at her. She knew he didn't understand much English. But, when his small arms looped around her neck and he kissed her cheek, she knew he understood her.

Seven days later the red Mazda pulled up the gravel road to Uncle Vai's house where Ellie, Potu, Willy, Little Manuel and about ten others were staying.

She had never been so happy to see Vic and her 21-year-old half-brother Tavita. She ran to them with Little Manuel trailing behind.

"You've come to save me from this heat and misery," Ellie hugged them both. "Don't be shocked but Potu will make you visit dad," she warned Vic.

"She'll what?" he asked.

She could see her brother was already sweating through his shirt. Savaii was the hottest island she'd been to in Samoa and the air was as thick as honey.

Potu, Willy and dozens of others came out of their houses to see Vic – Manuel's eldest son.

"Oh Vic, we so happy you come," Potu kissed him and put a flower lei around his neck.

Vic and Willy pretended to box each other.

"Hey, it's my big bruddah," Willy's smile was as wide as his chubby face.

"I'm afraid I've been boring, reading and helping with the shopping, not too fun of a sister," Ellie explained to Vic.

"And we see dad every day," Willy added.

Ellie gave Vic a roll of her eyes.

She had escaped one day with Willy and Little Manuel to go see the swimming turtles at Satoalepai Wetlands. It was about an hour drive from their village and a nice ride in a taxi where she rolled down the window and felt the wind on her face.

The green turtles were old and swam under dilapidated *fales* and the watchful eyes of village children who teased them and collected the \$2 per visit charge.

There was something tranquil about watching the lumbering turtles swim in the algae-laden water. It had been a nice respite from her daily routine of watching old DVDs, napping, reading, visiting dad, having meals, taking part in nightly prayers and watching the village kids play volleyball in the cool of sunset.

Another day Ellie went to visit her cousin Tina at her school. Tina was a promising young teacher there and married to an attractive young man from the next village. Ellie took pictures of each classroom with her digital camera and showed the kids photos much to their fascination and laughter. Each classroom was crudely furnished with old desks, books and posters. The air was a stagnant 100 degrees. She met the principal and other teachers as she walked through the classrooms.

“Good morning Miss Ellie,” each child said with their sweet, shy voices as they stood up behind their desks to greet her.

She stayed for their lunch recess and walked around the schoolyard. She greeted children, their baby sisters or brothers and their moms who were helping to serve lunch out of crude wooden stands. She looked around her to find dozens of barefoot children in their starched red and white school uniforms following her. They were all ages. Some of the girls had turtle combs in their wavy dark hair pulled back to reveal sandy-toothed smiles, dimples and small earrings.

The boys wore white shirts and red *lava lavas* around their waists, revealing their brown, thin legs scarred from climbing coconut trees. She looked at her own burnt skin and noticed the difference.

So many differences, she thought.

“Now I know what Angelina Jolie feels like,” Ellie joked to Tina who smiled politely. She knew Tina didn’t get the joke as soon as she said it.

The air barely moved but again Ellie noticed no one sweat except for her.

She was perspiring from her face to her legs to her toes. She looked down the hill to see the Pacific shining up at her, taunting her to come in.

She promised herself she'd swim as soon as the ceremonies were over.

But there were still trips to the store for fabric, the market for fish, eggs and bread, and to respectfully have tea with the pastor and his wife.

Luckily there was an ATM in town as well. It came in handy when she took her younger cousins to Club Evelyn one night and realized they had no money to pay for all the Valima beer they were drinking. It also came in handy the dozen or so times Potu told her "We pay the man" or "We pay the lady."

There were the cousins to pay for grave supplies. There was the woman to pay who worked for the inter-island airline. She had the reservation books at her house and could change people's reservations for a fee. She happily did this so Vic and Tavita could get seats on an earlier flight, knocking some poor unsuspecting riders out of theirs.

When Ellie was 13, Manuel took the family on a long-awaited trip to Portugal. It was such a surprise because the most the family ever did was travel to the Family Tree for dinner.

But there she was flying on *TAP* to Terceira and then on *Sata* to Pico, her father's boyhood island. She spent four weeks in her grandmother's large house in the middle of the village. She swam with her brother and ate Portuguese bread and cheese with her mom and dad. She walked to the next village over for creamy French ice cream. Relatives with names like Rui and Adierito and Maria Theresa visited every day. They

watched old reruns of *I Love Lucy* on a small black and white television set in her grandmother's den.

Her dad took Ellie and her brother to see the men slaughter a whale on the other side of the island. It was the one they had seen romping in the ocean near *Calheta* the day before.

“They use all the parts of the whale, so it's okay,” he assured her.

It was the seventies in the sleepy Azores and Greenpeace hadn't visited their shores yet.

Later, when she joined PETA, she'd think of the blood and pieces of whale strewn all over the cobblestone wharf.

She watched her dad drink homemade wine made from the grapes at their *adega* and ate white spaghetti with her cousins. Manuel laughed loudly and talked in Portuguese to his relatives and friends. They walked on the cobblestone streets and she was *fila de Manuel*.

She felt pride in her throat.

It was the best summer of her life.

She came back to San Diego tanned and happy. Her dad had to leave again to go fishing. That time, she went to the docks to wave good-bye.

It was something she would do less and less as his drinking got worse. The fighting was louder too and every once in a while, an antique vase or frame would come crashing to the floor. When she heard her father's slurred words and her mother crying,

she'd hide in her closet and shut her eyes. She'd try to remember that summer when Manuel laughed as he swam off the docks.

The night before the funeral no one slept except for Vic, Ellie, Willy and Tavita. That is, they tried to sleep. The fan in her room kept humming but it couldn't drown out the laughter coming from outside.

She could feel the heat of the cookhouse fire not far from her window. Vic, an amateur photographer ran out of his room to shoot their cousins carrying a huge pig on their shoulders.

"Jesus I've never seen a pig that big," Vic laughed, as he took shot after shot running backwards in front of them.

The men posed in the night with their tattoos glistening and a large roasted pig on leaves.

Ellie couldn't sleep so she tried to help her cousin Ana who was sewing ornate trim on large silk fabric to cover the coffin. In another corner, her step-aunt Fetoai and Tina were gluing plastic flowers to graveside decorations.

Potu was making egg salad for the *falelauasiga* after the funeral.

People walked in and out of the *fale* asking Potu questions in Samoan. She pointed and gave instructions, steadily in charge.

She seemed happy and busy, they all did, Ellie thought.

"Wow, it's party time," Vic joked to her.

Ellie asked if she could help with the activities but was just told to rest.

She and Vic shrugged and went into a side room to sit by fans. It was 2 a.m. but the heat was still stifling.

They talked about what was soon to come.

Vic sensed Ellie had enough of the funeral talk. He began to give a review of the book he was reading about King Henry the VIII of England.

Ellie loved that about her brother. He always had some interesting but semi-useless fact about politics, history or the weather. It had landed him on the game show *Jeopardy*. He weaved stories better than television.

There they were, the night before Manuel's funeral, talking about the succession of King Henry's wives and medieval dental care.

She woke up groggy. It was 6 a.m. and already boiling hot.

She dressed in the obligatory white blouse and slacks for the church service. Ellie drove with Tina and Potu to Sefo's to check on her father.

He was ready.

The inside of his coffin was draped with ceremonial silk. He was dressed in a formal black suit, tie and baseball cap. He was adorned with floral leis. There was a framed photo of Manuel taken on White Sunday inside the coffin. Willy had made a touching note with crude English and a large red heart and placed it in his hands.

Potu was in white with a large hat and the pearls he had brought her from the Philippines.

Potu walked around the coffin, gently smoothing his suit and adjusting his tie. She clasped his hands and kissed his forehead again and again. She wiped her eyes with the handkerchief he'd given her when they first dated.

Ellie kissed her dad's stiff forehead, realizing it was the first time she'd kissed him since she sat with him in ICU.

Potu looked relieved.

When they first met, Potu was 35 and Manuel was 50. His friend Neil introduced the shy cannery worker to Manuel. Never mind that Manuel had a family and three kids in San Diego. Potu --and soon Tavita -- became his second family in Samoa. He built a small house on the beach in Lauli'i, a village where Potu's cousin was the chief. Years later, they adopted Willy from Potu's niece.

Ellie didn't know about them until her mother's sudden death.

Her first trip to Samoa was to meet ten-year-old Tavita for the first time. Manuel's past and present collided – different sides of the same ocean.

His drinking wasn't always bad. She was 15 and wanted to see her guitar teacher's recital. He drove her even though she knew he didn't like classical guitar.

After she had moved out, she picked him up at 5:30 for the morning Easter service at Cabrillo National Monument. They sat next to each other in the cold, listening to a choir sing overlooking San Diego Bay. She knew he didn't believe in God but he sat next to her, with his quiet thoughts. They went to The Egg Palace for pancakes after the service.

Before she became sober, they'd sit in the den and drink homemade Portuguese wine his sisters had smuggled out of the Azores for him. He'd tell her funny stories about growing up in the Azores.

"I used to ride a unicycle," he said.

"I played the clarinet, standing on my head," he told her another time.

"There are no flies in Portugal," he teased.

"My favorite dog was a mule who slept by my bed."

She would laugh and laugh and eat Portuguese cheese and olives that Maria Azevedo made for him. He would laugh too.

When she was five, she ordered the doll of the day from Santa who she stopped to talk with at Sears.

"I want a Baby Grow-A-Tooth Santa."

Years later, her mother told her that Manuel had gone to four stores to try and find the doll but it was sold out. He finally found one at the last store and brought it home Christmas Eve.

The next morning, Ellie saw that Santa had listened.

Her dad laughed and her mom smiled and hugged him.

Manuel would barbecue when he was home and many of their neighbors joined their family for hamburgers and hotdogs in the patio, spilling mustard on the red and white cotton checked tablecloth. They'd drink beer and laugh under the glass buoy and macramé plants hanging in the patio.

He was very big on making macramé for many years. Soon their backyard was filled with macramé hangers for spider plants that her mom wouldn't let in the house. Ellie learned how to macramé from her father.

Manuel took the kids to the Loma Theatre on a school night to see *Sound of Music* and let them eat as much popcorn and Junior Mints as they wanted.

Her father let her cousin Cathy live at their house for a week after her dad – Ellie's uncle – had beaten her with a belt.

“Just until he calms down,” Manuel had told her mother.

Manuel loved Samoa.

He'd tell her about White Sunday, the one day when the parents waited on their kids. He showed her pictures. He introduced her to the Pastor of the church they attended.

“Just give him some money for the service, and if you don't have it, I can give it to you to give to him. Then, they announce you.”

Her father introduced her to Nele, the *fa'afafine* who worked at the Harbor Sun restaurant.

“Isn't that a guy?” Ellie asked him after Nele had taken their order.

“It's different down here, no big deal,” he told her.

Ellie watched him kneel on his arthritic knees at church for 20 minutes when the pastor said the Samoan prayers. He didn't understand them, but knelt anyway.

She saw him slip money to villagers when they knocked on his door to say, “Manuel, do you have the money please?” and showed him their electric bill.

“Your daddy is a good man,” Sa had told her. Sa was her “cousin” and one of Potu’s many relatives to stay at their house at one time or another.

The day had come.

The choir sang at Sefo’s and the pastor said a prayer.

Manuel’s coffin was put in an old black hearse and driven to their village by one of Sefo’s brothers.

Potu insisted Ellie sit in the hearse for the drive.

They drove slowly out of Sefo’s business, a place she never wanted to see again.

Other cars trailed slowly behind.

Villagers stopped what they were doing and again bowed as they drove by.

Women walking with their children stopped. Men trimming trees stopped. Young girls sweeping with small brooms stopped.

They all stopped and bowed.

Ellie didn’t bother to hold back her tears this time.

When they arrived at the village, there were dozens of people there dressed in white. She saw Vic, Willy and Tavita who didn’t realize anything would be done at the first stop.

“There was already a service?” Vic asked her.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, just go with the flow,” she whispered to him.

Four of the villagers hoisted Manuel’s now closed coffin onto their shoulders.

They marched him into the decorated church. Its rusty ceiling fans swooshed, as the music played and the church filled with people all in white.

Both pastors from Saletagaloa and Lau'i – American and Western Samoa meeting – spoke at the *maliu* for Manuel Souza.

Potu spoke, her melodious voice stopping to pause while she wiped her eyes. Women in the pews nodded and blew their noses. From her limited understanding, Ellie could make out that Potu was saying Manuel was a fine man who helped her and made a home for her and her boys.

At least that's what Ellie hoped Potu was saying.

Ellie stood up and spoke with her brother Tavita translating. She was pleased to that the same funny stories she had told back at the other service in California elicited laughs from the crowd. They were delayed laughs after translation. But, she'd take it.

She could always say she inherited her sense of humor from him.

"Humor and death are universal," she thought as she looked at the crowd.

Vic didn't speak but took pictures instead.

More tributes were said in Samoan by relatives and villagers.

Everyone wore buttons with Manuel's picture on it and the years of his life written under his picture.

Cloth draping rituals were performed.

After the two-hour service, they carried Manuel to his final resting place.

It was a concrete grave dug deep into the lava rich soil by Potu's sister's house.

More prayers were said and Little Manuel cried, “Manu, Manu” as they put the coffin in the ground.

Potu put fine mats and flowers over his coffin.

The cement lid was placed on top of his finery and he was no more. She looked at the people around his gravesite. He was their husband, leader, father and friend. They were genuinely sad about his death.

Ellie changed to more comfortable clothes for the *Falelauasiga*.

She and Vic greeted dozens and dozens of family, villagers, and friends from both Tutuila and Savai'i. Manuel's American lawyer and his wife traveled from Pago Pago to be there too.

Vic and Ellie ate egg salad, breadfruit, roast pig and examined other food they couldn't identify but didn't eat.

“Maybe later we can go to the Siafaga Tourist Resort and have spaghetti or hamburgers,” she said.

As they sat at the party talking to her father's American born lawyer and his wife, the lemon-colored day turned into an angry sky.

Winds roared and rain pounded the rusty *fale* roofs. Some men from the village put up a giant tarp over Manuel's grave with still drying cement.

Everyone ran in their houses.

Ellie and Vic called it “Hurricane Manuel.”

“I guess he’s saying ‘Okay, so you buried me, now get on with it,’” Vic said to Ellie and squeezed her shoulder.

“He probably wouldn’t have liked the pomp and trouble,” Ellie added. “Maybe he’d rather have a Vailima at Club Evelyn’s instead!”

After about an hour, Ellie excused herself and fell into a slumber she hadn’t had for months.

In her dream, she was a little girl and Manuel was helping her walk over the small bridge from the dock to his fishing boat.

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you,” he told her when she said she was afraid to cross over the green water below. “I’m afraid Daddy, really afraid.”

“I’ll catch you, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

When she woke up it was dark.

She walked into the living room and saw Vic and Willy watching television,

“I was kidnapped,” Vic told her laughing.

“What?”

“Sefo and his goons say I didn’t pay enough for the air conditioning so they put me in dad’s hearse and drove me to the ATM by the market.”

All they could do was look at each other and laugh.

Later that night, their dad's pastor from his Lau'i church presented Vic and Ellie with a plaque.

It was ornately carved wood and a tribute from the Methodists for the work Manuel had done for the church.

"O le mea sili ua in tei taiou le atua," it read.

"Best of all, God is with us."

The day after the funeral, Ellie, Vic, Willy and Tavita drove to Siafaga Tourist Resort. They rented kayaks for \$5.

Ellie took a break from swimming and rested in a hammock held up by palm trees. Turquoise water sparkled up at her.

Vic walked to the café to buy burgers for everyone.

Tavita and Willy's brown backs glistened with saltwater as they raced each other in orange and yellow kayaks.

No one else was on the peaceful beach.

"Best of all God is with us," she thought.

A bright yellow bird flew by.