

## ALOHA

Gary and Jim hunker beneath the hood of my orange Chevy Nova, blond heads nearly touching, burley arms moving in unison. It's hot, stifling – Michigan in August. Beads of sweat snake between my breasts and slither to the waistband of my paisley culottes.

I gaze at Mullet Lake, almost blinding in its shimmer, longing for its cool water and sandy beach instead of blazing sun and faint breeze. Out there, my father sits in his motor boat, teasing for bluegill and lake trout. He's on the water dawn to dusk during my parents' annual two-week vacation with family and friends. Twenty-three showed up this year, twenty-four counting me.

I arrived last night at Aloha Campground, aptly named I think, as I leave tomorrow for California. I'm here to say goodbye. My attention strays to the silver Air Stream parked in the adjacent campsite when Mom exits, all pink muumuu, straw hat, white-rimmed sunglasses. She strolls over with two glasses of tea, ice tinkling as she walks.

“How's it going, boys?” she asks.

They grunt and Gary holds up a wrench in his right hand and waves, not looking up. She shrugs and hands me a glass, painted with scenes of the Mackinaw Bridge. I gulp the tea in quick swallows.

“You're sure Elaine isn't going to leave you hanging, right? Although I don't know where she'll put her stuff.”

Mom peers inside the car, packed with clothes and camping gear.

“Elaine is only bringing one suitcase. She's flying back, remember?”

Mom supports the move to San Diego for a paid internship to finish my master's degree. Five months, I tell her. I don't mention I'm not coming back.

ALOHA

“Why don’t we take some lawn chairs and head to the beach?” she asks. “You boys’ll be okay, right?”

Gary repeats the wrench wave. I follow her to the side of the trailer and we grab two beach chairs from its screened-in porch. The netting is a precaution and a necessity. Michigan mosquitoes are notoriously fierce, and anyone who sits out in the open at night – the bugs’ favorite time for marauding – risks bloody injury. Mom and I don’t say much during the short trek to the water’s edge. She starts right in with the questions, though, once our chairs nestle in the sand under an aqua umbrella someone planted on the beach.

“What does Dave think about you leaving?”

I stare at the lake as I ponder my answer.

“He’s okay with it,” I say, sounding unsure even to myself. “He’ll probably come out later. Maybe Thanksgiving.”

“A little break will do you good. I’m going to say something that you probably don’t want to hear. Dave isn’t right for you, not for a lifetime anyway.”

“Wow. You never said anything.” I pause to gather my thoughts. “We’ve been dating two years, Mom. Two years,” I repeat, as if she doesn’t know.

“A mother shouldn’t interfere, but now that you’re leaving...” she shrugs.

I hadn’t planned to tell her about our frequent fights, or that I said let’s wait when he asked me to marry him. This is 1973, and women’s liberation finally arrived in the backwater town of Flushing where I taught seventh grade. I meet weekly with a group of young women. We bolster each other with talk about not settling for a life of cooking and cleaning and kids. We yearn for careers and travel and adventure.

“We’ve been having a few problems lately,” I hedge.

ALOHA

Mom stays silent. *Did she even hear me?*

“You know, Sarah, your dad is so proud of you. He may not say it, but he is. I am, too. Ever since you went off to college, I believed you were destined for the life I never had.”

“You aren’t happy?” I gasp.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love your dad. You and your sisters are my world. But my dream was to study science.”

I look at my mother, really look at her.

“We had fewer choices back then,” she continues. “I’ve told you how I left the farm at seventeen. Your grandparents practically killed themselves, picking the sugar beets they grew. I picked right alongside them. Couldn’t wait to get away. Life in the big city. Saginaw. We know how that turned out.”

Mom met my father at a nightclub. He, newly out of the Army and World War II. She, sneaking in with a fake ID and lots of moxie. I heard that story many times. She came with her older roommates, Bernice and Gwen Sack. My father sauntered over with his friend, Sharkey – of zoot suit and crazy dance moves fame.

“Meet the Sack Sisters, Sharkey,” my father quipped. “Burlap and Gunny.”

Mom laughed, though the sisters didn’t. She loved his sense of humor. He loved her blonde hair and beautiful smile.

“I quit my job when we got married. Lots of women did. Then came you girls. Dreams fade. Or seem less important somehow.”

Mom stops talking and stares straight ahead. Her sunglasses reflect the lake, hiding her eyes. I try to talk, but a serious lump in my throat stops me. Maybe now I can tell her the truth.

ALOHA

“We’ll visit at Christmas,” she says. “Or sometime next year. I want to see California again.”

She already knows.

“Remember that trip we took out there when you were a kid?” Mom says, not missing a beat. “I picked up a rock in every state for the garden I dreamed about all winter. Your dad, that guy. He threw out those rocks every night when I wasn’t looking. He claimed we’d never have gotten back over the Rockies with all that extra weight.”

Mom is off and running on a nostalgia trip. She talks. I listen, as I have for most of my life when in my mother’s company.

“Well, kiddo,” she says after a while, “I need to get back and start supper. We’re having fish. I’m boiling hotdogs. Just in case.”

We’re laughing as we fold the lawn chairs and walk back to the trailer. Gary and Jim lean against my car, drinking Budweiser.

“This baby is good to go,” Gary says. “Oil changed. Mini tune-up. We even rotated the tires.”

He clinks beer cans with his brother.

“Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it. How much do I owe you?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Jim says. “We don’t charge relatives. Besides, this is our thing.”

The three of us jump when we hear a loud crash from inside the trailer.

“Guess I’m off to do women’s work,” I say, though I doubt my cousins recognize the sarcasm. *Why am I trying to bait them?* They saved me some serious money.

“How can I help?” I squeeze into the tiny kitchen.

ALOHA

Mom balances on her hands and knees wiping at some ketchup. “The bottle slipped out of my hand. Gimme a minute and you can help make the potato salad.”

She swipes at her face with the red-stained rag. When she stands up, I see the tears she tries to hide.