

*A Short Story*

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# What Covers the House Is a Roof

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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Photo created by OpenAI software Dall-E (an AI generator) using the direction: “large Hawaiian man standing beside a hut in the jungle looking at the ocean in the distance at sunset, digital art”.

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When Small Man looks past the glare of spotlights, into the audience, he can see their white teeth gleaming, their smiles ear to ear. He's thinking about this song he's playing, this horrible slack key song called "Whee Ha Swing." These days he plays it before the tourists, full from Honolulu luau and drunk on Blue Hawaiians, come to the stage with their sweaty dollar bills. They've heard it somewhere, maybe in a cab, or read about it in the *Hawaiian Airlines* magazine. They hear the first eight bars and whistle. Small Man smiles, beads of perspiration catching in those lights, and throws his head back like he's into it, like he loves that swing. But he's not, and he doesn't.

He's thinking about how fat he's been all his life. "Ever since da bugga was born," his tutu would say. And she was there, so she would know. Small Man's mother gave birth at tutu's one-bedroom house in Peahi, on Maui. She didn't have electricity, so the room was lit with half-spent white candles from the Baptist church. The tall vertebrae of kukui nuts strung through with trussing twine hung from the ceiling, their oil pushing a bitter, pungent smell into the air. After tutu wiped the birth from his face and blew into his nostrils, he burst into low moans. Then she thrust him against his mother's bare chest and covered them both in the geometric black and white of an old, family kapa cloth, a protection. "Da little bugga one baby Buddha," Tutu said, which was a sweet thing to say, because he was a baby, and even saying a baby is a little ugly can seem sweet. But it's nothing less than nauseating at 30.

On Fridays after his last set, Small Man goes to Max's bath house on Hobron Street. In the dry sauna, there are boys who he knows will not notice him, or, when they do, will be driven away by his presence. Mostly, he's given up on the expectation of any sex, any small talk, any sort of kindness. Now Small Man comes to sit in front of the full-length mirror and look at himself. His brown belly hides his penis and testicles. His tattoos stretch and sag around his arms and chest. He doesn't eat on Fridays even though he knows it won't make any kind of difference that day. He thinks about being fat since he was little and how, as he grew, the neighbor kids named him Small Man. He thinks about how that was never a bad thing, how it was also something sweet they did, like calling the transvestites on Hotel Street, Honey Girls. Now, Small Man comes here to look on himself, get eye to eye, and affirm, *Despite all this, I am made to love.*

At home, Small Man eyes the refrigerator. Many times he has thought about putting up pictures of ripped men looking hot on the beach or sad, fat men, but it seems too embarrassing. Instead, the back of a white business envelope held up by a small magnetic pineapple reads, "Whoa, boy!" And some nights that is enough to get him through to the morning, though those nights are filled with fever-dreams. But some nights it's not enough. Sometimes Small Man sees that envelope, taps it a few times with his pointer finger and says, "Fuck you, boy!" and turns it over to an empty cellophane window. Tonight is one of those nights.

He starts with broccoli and cauliflower, trying to fill his stomach. It doesn't suffice and he's on to four King's rolls, Nutella, and a glass of 2% milk. For a minute he lets it settle, gives himself a beat to

pretend that he's not going to eat more. Then it's pizza rolls. Then there's the tub of cookie dough, which he knows will only make him restless. Still, he eats it, then retires to his sofa and the ever-deepening dip in the middle cushion. He's still hungry but he stops, thinking that if he could just get through every Friday they might add up to something, and falls asleep mumbling mantra 13 from the 21 Affirmations for Weight Loss: *I am choosing progress over perfection.* On Saturday morning he forgets and indulges his sadness with two burger patties and two mounds of rice, topped with three eggs and gravy with a short stack of pancakes.

After, he goes to his day job doing laundry at the Park Shore Waikiki. He used to managed the laundry room, but then all the walking became too much. He was demoted. Even so, upper management has been kind and allows him to sit at the industrial washers and dryers transferring and folding sheets and towels. He stacks them neatly for the housekeepers to divide and stock and redress the rooms.

By mid-morning he is already thick with a smell, so he changes his shirt for the afternoon. At lunch, in the break room, he eats a Greek yogurt, half a bagel, and a cup of fruit. The other employees smile and accept his façade. When the day is done, coworkers invite him to barbecues or out for pupus and drinks but he always declines. He returns to his small apartment to eat how he's wanted to all day. Then he moves to the sofa with his ukulele and plays until his fingers and forearms and shoulders tire.

He downloads Grindr and Scruff and sifts through the profiles on his phone. There are tight-bodied kanakas and scrawny Filipinos and

sweet-eyed haoles. But there's no one there looking for love. He downloads OK Cupid and Plenty of Fish. He doesn't list his stats other than his age. He says he went to college. He says he likes the sea-beach and bubble tea and good conversation. He says he doesn't read much but listens to music like it's "going out of style." He says he's looking for a man from 18-70 with any kind of body. He's never posted a photo, but he's thought about posting one of someone else—someone he's found in a Google search that looks just normal enough—and hopes that if they did meet up, that person would look past his lying. Then he deletes all those apps and begins mantra 9: *I am surrounded and protected by healing white light.*

This is how Small Man's weeks move until Thursday when he climbs onto the stage and plays and sings and perspires. People clap and whistle and cheer and he thinks this is the only place a fat, Hawaiian man can be adored.

Friday morning, Small Man opens his eyes at 6.00 am. The ceiling fan spins fast enough that it rocks, like it might rip into the white, popcorn ceiling. He speaks aloud Mantra 19: *Lots of new and exciting things are opening up in my life.* He sees himself not skinny, but thinner. He sees himself on stage at Blaisdell Arena, playing for thousands. Jack Johnson joins him on stage. He sees a Hawaiian man off-stage, pumping his fist into the air, smiling, mouthing *I Love You*. Small Man repeats the mantra twenty times, and it feels so good that he commits to another twenty, but before he can finish, the phone rings.

"Aloha," he says into the receiver. The cord is bound in kinks, forces him to roll to his side and crane his head to the nightstand.

“Is your Auntie.”

“Aloha, Auntie. Why you call so early?”

“Boy, is your mada.” There is a small pause, which is enough time for Small Man to push himself to a sitting position. “She not well, Boy.”

“What you mean?”

Small Man is standing with the base of the phone in his other hand moving to the wall, to the light switch.

“Henry’s dog, da one at da corner, went bit her.” “Go take her to the doctor then.”

“No, Boy. She went got bit one week ago. She no get better.” “How you mean?” Small Man asks.

There is the sound of his Auntie thinking, whether she is rubbing her chin or scratching her forehead.

“She mad, Boy,” his Auntie says then continues to explain how after the bite, which wasn’t too bad, they dressed the wound with mashed taro leaves to cleanse and draw out any poison then rubbed it down with kukui nut oil to soothe. After, her muscles cramped and a fever set in. “And now she drooling, Boy. Just like one mad dog.”



“Auntie, take her to hospital,” Small Man says, with a desperate pitch in his voice.

“Dr. Wanaka went stop by and said ‘no can do anything but keep her comfort- able’.” There was non-silence again. “She going da kine, Boy. You come home now.” Then she hangs up.

Small Man thinks about the fridge and seeing what might be there to allay his anxiety. He knows there’s deli ham and gouda cheese. He knows there’s lau laus. He knows there’s a Skinny Cow Mint Chip ice cream bar in the freezer. But he knows he can’t. He has no time. So, he packs. He doesn’t think about which pair of shorts or how many underwear because his head is still in the fridge then back to his mom. But when he thinks of his mom and her dying, his head is back in the fridge. Within minutes he’s toeing his slippers and grabbing his keys from the abalone shell on the small kitchen table then he’s passing the fridge.

“Come on, bruddah,” he says to himself. “Come on,” he says earnestly.

He opens the door, surveys, and sees the pint of low-fat buttermilk and he knows that it will calm him because he knows that it has only 100 calories per cup. He takes the carton, and he’s out the door.

Small Man stopped driving two years ago. The last car he had was a two-door Ford Fiesta, but he abandoned it when he got so heavy the car scrapped speed bumps, and the kids would point and laugh, the steering wheel tight to his belly and chest. *What I must have looked like?* he thought. *Like I'd been there my whole life, and the car just grew around me.* With a brief look from a woman pushing a stroller, a look that might have been saying nothing more than anything about her own life, Small Man pulled over at Ala Wai Park and left the Fiesta, and when the notice came from impound, he didn't respond.

He waits for the bus because he stopped taking taxis soon after he abandoned his car. There were all sorts of crazies on the bus. Even if they judged him, he didn't care.

At the airport, in the security check line, he knows they're all looking at him. Their faces say: "Ke Akua, please do not let him be on my flight. And, if so, please do not let him be in my aisle. And, if so, just not next to me. Aloha." But the flight isn't full, and when the door closes he hoists himself from the aisle seat, where he is taking up half of the middle seat, nods to the woman at the window, and pushes his way to the back, where he can feel comfortable in his own row.

When the plane lifts off, he is finally left without distraction to consider his mother. The last time he saw her was three years ago when his Tutu Mary passed, who was short and lean, a troubled woman, which showed in the deep creases on her face. She was rarely rude, but skeptical and suspicious and kept her distance in conversation. Her children were cautious and overly-courteous, ready to tend to any perceived need—though not desire, because they couldn't be sure what kind of desire that might be. She wasn't affectionate, even in her death,

saying to her children, "just leave me here to go." And this, Small Man believes, is why his mother has always been so soft and giving, willing to bend in any direction, willing to offer any sort of comfort.

Because of that, Small Man feels terrible. He hasn't been home because he's got- ten bigger, so much bigger, than she will have imagined. To be stuck with himself is one thing, but to be revealed, made to really see himself through other eyes—the sense of it was unbearable. Still, here he is, making his slow disembarkment down the white, met- al stairs, which strain under his weight, then across the tarmac, its absorbed heat pushing up and around him so that each step is like an ever-warming cocoon, and he can feel the sweat build and pour, and the anxiety explode until his legs are quaking, until he remembers Affirmation No. 2: *I choose to breathe in relaxation and breathe out stress*. And that gets him into the airport, past baggage claim, and out the shiny, sliding doors.

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Home is 30 miles from the airport, on the other side of the island. He wants to walk because he's sworn off taxis, but he can't be certain that even a few miles won't kill him. Resistant, he stands in the queue.

"Aloha," says a tiny, aged, brown woman in front of him.

"Aloha," he says back, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

“So hot out hea, no?” she says.

Small Man thinks about how she has no idea. “Yes. So hot, auntie.”

Then the woman beckons him down to her ear, and he bends, the perspiration dripping to the concrete. “No be shame. Hot out hea for all us,” she says and pats him on the hand.

Small Man smiles softly, hoping she will see how much he appreciates her kindness. But, really, he hates it. Because now he’s thinking about how everyone is sorry for him.

“Ho! You fucka!” a thick, bass voice catches his attention. “Small Man, that you?”

When Small Man turns his head, he sees a police car at the curb. A shaka is extended out the driver’s window. Small Man shakas back, trying to place the man’s tough, dark face, his eyes hidden behind reflective sunglasses.

Small Man doesn’t respond, but changes his kind smile to a generic grin.

“Hui,” the policeman calls out, takes off his glasses. “Shit, bruddah. Dat is you!” Small Man can see its Paulie Boy, one of the neighborhood kids from his hometown.

“Ho,” Small Man says, “you one cop?”

“Long time now, brah.”

“Shoots,” Small Man says. “Das alright.” And they both pause in that for a moment, unsure of what to say next.

“What you standing over there foa?” Paulie asks, pointing to the queue.

Because Small Man has a grip of memories about Paulie that all end with Paulie being generally stupid, he has to catch himself before saying anything rude. “Getting one cab.”

“Where you go foa?”

“Home,” Small Man says.

“Get in, brah. I go take you,” Paulie says.

Without hesitation, and because he thinks how any judgement that Paulie could bring at him would mean nothing, Small Man starts for the passenger door, rounding the car’s front end. Paulie revs the engine as he passes, and Small Man startles for a second. He hears Paulie laughing and saying in a high-pitched voice, “Sucka.”

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Initially, Small Man is concerned because the ride started with Paulie asking so many questions about living in Honolulu and singing

at the bar and if there were any lovers. The first questions were easy enough to field because they required yes or no answers, but it was the last question that Small Man stutters on until he finally says, “Not really,” which makes him feel worse, because, he thinks, he should have just said “no” or “look at me” or nothing at all. Small Man stares out the windshield, watching the white, shoulder stripe continue. Then Paulie is on to talking about how his girl left him in a bad way, and Small Man realizes that it doesn’t matter if he is listening or not, that simply nodding his head will be enough.

Small Man remembers how hard and nice Paulie Boy had been as a child. He was the first to call Small Man *fatty* and the first to defend him when others did the same. He once told Small Man that, because he was so fat, he would never get a date to the County Friendship Dance, then abandoned his own to watch music videos through the night, not once complaining even when they could hear the music spilling past the walls of the dance hall, even when it died out and there were beach parties to be had. Outside of those memories and a few more generic, now nebulous, scenes there was nothing more to their friendship, if that is even how it should be named.

“You wanna suck my dick?” Paulie asks, pulling to a stop at Small Man’s home, the long, dirt driveway climbing up and over a poky hill.

Paulie slowly leans toward him, pauses, then laughs and gives him a double-punch in the arm. “Fucking got you, brah. Fucking got you.” Then Small Man’s laughing, too, and the ringing subsides. “Brah, you no paying attention.”

“Sorry,” Small Man says looking down, trying to find any kind of words to string together that would explain it all, because he thinks he might want to tell it all to some- one, that it might change something, though he can’t imagine what.

“Why you home foa?” Paulie asks.

“My ma no good, brah. She da kine,” Small Man says, looking, without really meaning to, at Paulie.

“Mm,” Paulie says then purses his lips, keeping his stare straight ahead.

The mood is adrift so Small Man opens the car door and thanks Paulie for the ride to which Paulie nods and says, “Brah, you gotta fix that fence. This place look junk.”

“For reals,” Small Man says.

Standing there, watching the dust explode behind Paulie’s car as it peels and fishtails, Small Man feels a comfort—the kind that comes from being a part of something, or having never been separate, the kind he hasn’t felt in a very long time.

~

At the top of the hill, he rests on the broad stump of a mango tree. He surveys the small house. Nothing much has changed; though,

he can see how two siding boards have rotted and the blue paint has faded. The Bermuda grass is tall and thick and gray. At the fence line, the lilikoi has gone wild, the bright yellow fruit spreading itself along the ground to a young, carambola tree, choking out the starry fruit, reaching for the sun. Past their simple home, the land is crowded. Old houses have been razed and replaced by winter cottages and sprawling boutique ranches. The country he knew as a child was slowly becoming another kind of country, a gleaming kind of country.

“Der da boy,” his Auntie bellows from the front door.

“Looking good, Auntie” Small Man says, hoisting himself from the stump.

“Oh, stop you,” Auntie says pulling at the collar of her hibiscus mu’u mu’u. “So fresh.”

When Small Man hugs her, she trembles and that scares him. He thinks it’s been those three years since he’s felt real touch, so he holds into the hug a bit longer.

Auntie pulls her head from his shoulder and motions to the house, keeping her gaze to the ground. Inside, the curtains are drawn, which makes the must that much thicker.

“No light?” Small Man asks.

“She no like.”



“Can open the windows, though,” Small Man says and Auntie moves from his side to pull the slats in the living room then onto the kitchen.

Nothing has changed, every same old object in its place. The nappy, green couch. The Korean War mug that belonged to his father—though he was never in the war, never once saw any battle, but drank himself to death just the same. The most uncomfortable koa wood chair, still with no cushion. On the hutch, the dark, varnished ipu his mother used to keep time while she sang mele next to the pink, feathered ili ili hula gourds. On the wall, the four white frames of her three brothers and one sister, all, except for Auntie, gone now in one way or another, surrounding a gold-painted frame of tutu. He’d never been sure if it was there as a symbol of his mother’s love, or a reminder of his grandmother’s sternness—her chestnut hair wrapped atop her head, her dour face, her pursed lips, her glassy eyes peering through thin, rimless spectacles. Past the small room, a hallway. To the left, a bathroom, still no shower. To the right, the bedroom door closed—the ticking of a fan pushing through.

“She in der,” Auntie says, pointing like beyond is something otherworldly. “Swallow one time real hard, Boy.” He does as told then turns the knob.

There’s the yellowed, oscillating fan. There’s the peeling, white chest of drawers. There’s the square, white matching nightstand. There’s the rusted, metal folding chair. Then there’s the bed where his mother lays in a rose-tinted nightgown, moisture pasting the fabric to her boney body. Her breathing is truncated. Her head twitches in time.

Her eyes are closed.

Small Man takes in a large breath, and it's not even must, it's like inhaling the sweltering drip and stink of a deep rain forest. It's hard to be faced with such a scene, so Small Man turns to leave.

“Well, ain't you a sight for sore eyes.”

“Hi, mama,” he replies, pivoting back.

“We're fixing to luau,” she says, pointing to the chair. Small Man eases himself onto the metal.

“You been gone so long,” she says.

“Been busy,” he says. “You know how it get.”

“Oh, don't I know it,” she says and begins a long series of dry swallows.

“You want water?”

“No, no. The water make me sick.” She puts her first two fingers in her mouth and sucks. Her nails are long and have grown dark. When she removes them, a thick strand of saliva follows.

She turns her head to eye him. “Looking so healthy, my boy. Look so,” she pauses and raises both hands in the air, her fingers balling into fists, “ikaika.”

Then he's up and out the door, his heavy foot falls reverberating through the living room until he's back in the yard, to the stump, the tears coming. He thinks, *It's one thing to feel weak, it's much harder to be told you're strong when you're not.* Then he's thinking about his 16th birthday luau and the buffet that was prepared and how he ate two proper plates at the long church table on the front lawn, under the mango tree, and how it made him so nervous, all the people from the village and the school kids that he was sure weren't his friends, all their talking and playing and singing, and how he grabbed the bowl of macaroni salad and walked away, eating it with his bare right hand, all the way down the dirt road until he reached the small, village cemetery, and perched himself on a headstone at first, the shame of disrespect coming over him even at 16 so that he sat on the ground alongside a patch of gardenia, and finished off the salad, catching the last of it all with his first two fingers circling round the rim—two fingers, just like his mother moments ago. *And this is how's it been for a long time now,* he thinks—all the anxiety and the terrible things pushing him to eat.

“Honey,” Auntie says and gathers up his one big hand into her two tiny ones.

~

Dr. Wanaka tells him that because she is older, and because she waited, all they can do is comfort her suffering with drugs, probably morphine; she will sweat and drool and seizure and hallucinate, maybe fear water, maybe light, maybe become agitated, maybe paranoid, and, eventually, the swelling of her brain will lead to a coma within a matter

of days, maybe just one. All of this, Small Man hears with the kind of strange calm that happens when life is sudden.

That first day, at home, Small Man and Auntie prepare the bedroom with leis of sweet smelling pikaki. They draw kukui nuts on long nails, fastened to the ends of scrap 2x4's—a low, gentle, light. Auntie burns dried hala palm husk, and the room clouds into a brindled haze. They take turns watching her fade in and out of consciousness.

Ku'u, their neighbor to the south, comes with laulaus and chicken long rice. She stands on the porch in her pink mu'u mu'u and slippers, her grey hair in a bun. She knocks and waits, and Small Man greets her, and he takes the food to the kitchen while she stays on the porch--certain not to enter, keeping her respect--and when he returns, she takes him by the forearms and says, "You a good one," and pats him on the face.

By early evening the news has spread, and in quick succession Dano and Cirella bring pork, fish, and beer. Jasmine brings fried chicken and haupia and iced tea. Kanani brings vodka and orange juice. Then it's T.J. and Leina'ala and the Agbayanis and some others that Small Man does not know. Auntie tells each of them to stay and they do, forming a circle of folding lawn chairs. None of them ask to see his mother, and Small Man isn't sure its respect but the kind of distance that means *Who wants to be reminded of their own mortality, of how bad it can be or get?* And he wants to blame them, as if, in his absence, they didn't take enough care.

Soon they are all drinking and talking story about his mother. There are stories he's heard before: of her youthful beauty, of how her hula was graced by the gods. Then Cirella says, "Boy, how she love your fadda." Then Kanani says in a vodka glaze, "Da bruddah could drink," her eyebrows raised, a dark kind of story in her tone. She laughs, but no one else does, because that kind of dark might find its way into the house.

So, Dano begins a story about Small Man's father, who, after being laid off from the pineapple plantation, which was to be shut down and moved out of country for cheap labor, became furious, starting his drunk early in the morning, and made his way to the plantation offices—a gleaming, white sprawling kind of building—and pulled down his pants and shit right there in front of the main doors, right on the foundation placard, and when the bosses came to the windows to look, he yelled over and over, "You like? You like?" And Dano says it in a funny way, which eases Kanani's comment.

Then there is song and more drink deep into the evening, until eyes are glassy and words become mumbles and there is only the crackle of a fire. Then Kanani raises her 8th glass and says, looking at Small Man as best she can, "You know what your ma did?" Dano interrupts, saying, "Come now, K".

"Boy," Kanani says, "Your ma made da life okay." Then pauses. "We all get given what we get given, and she made da life okay." There is silence. "You understand?"

When he searches his memories, though they are scattered and threadbare, he knows his mother has turned what kind of life they had into something good and acceptable. But, in some ways the stories don't matter. *They will not fill the void*, he thinks.

When Small Man looks around, the party nods solemnly. And, as if it were a convocation, they begin to fold their chairs and leave with parting hugs and kisses. Then Auntie retires too, and Small Man is left alone.

~

The second day Small Man sits on the porch, staring out into the thick of the trees, hoping that maybe she will never go, that by keeping watch it might spark something unseen, and bring her back. And while he is in prayer, his hands clasped over his lap, he hears the sound of a car, the loud beats of rap getting louder and stopping at the fence line.

Small Man watches as Paulie Boy makes his way to the porch, carrying a white, plastic grocery bag in one hand, a six pack of Twisted Tea in the other. He isn't boisterous; he walks with a kind of reverence.

"No good inside?" Paulie asks.

"Just need some air," Small Man says.

Paulie cracks two teas and pulls a bottle of peach schnapps from the grocery bag.

Small Man giggles.

“No laugh, brah,” Paulie says. “This the real kine shit. Get you where you need to go.” Paulie uncaps the bottle and takes a long pull and passes it to Small Man.

Small Man can’t tell if he wants to drink or not. Not drunk, he can see and feel everything. There are no surprises. At the same time, he thinks how nice it would be to let all the control go. He pauses.

“Come, brah,” Paulie says.

Small Man grabs the bottle. “You going give me diabetes.”

“You not already get?” Paulie asks. “All us kanakas get.”

Small Man thinks how it is good to not feel careful.

“She going maké?” Paulie asks, and it’s the kind of question that, makes Small Man’s throat tighten, creates a blinding flash.

“Maybe in a few days, maybe,” Small Man says.

Paulie clenches his jaw again and pulls the bottle of schnapps from Small Man and takes a long gulp. “Sorry don’t cut it,” he says. “Still, I sorry, brah. Your ma was so nice to me even when I was a fucka.”

“Dat da truth,” Small Man says and Paulie laughs, sniffing then wiping his nose. Small Man doesn’t look.

“What you going do? Stay hea or go back?”

“Don’t know.”

“You got one good life in da city?”

Small Man wants to say that he is happy, that he has all the friends, that he is in love, that he is full.

“Nah. It’s junk,” Small Man says. “One day to da next.”

Paulie Boy nods his head and puts his arm around Small Man’s shoulder, bringing Small Man’s head tight to his neck, but Small Man pulls away taking the bottle back and drinking.

“What, no can be affection cause you gay?” Paulie asks.

“Just, no can,” Small Man says, and he’s trying not to think about how he is built for love but maybe not for affection.

“How you then?” Small Man asks, and that’s enough to get Paulie Boy talking about his girl again.

“Always got the girl troubles,” Paulie Boy says, then goes on about his life on Maui, and then they leave talking about love and a dying mother. They talk about comic books and music and movies, and



if they'll ever go to the mainland and why, until they've finished the six-pack and half the bottle of peach schnapps.

“You want me stay?” Paulie Boy asks.

“No, brah. You go. Next time,” Small Man says.

“Shoots then. You call me. We go find you some hot meat.”

Small Man Laughs.

Paulie moves down the path then looks back and says, ”Big Boy. Remember, you beautiful.”

Small Man gives a shaka.

~

In the following days, Dr. Wanaka occasionally stops by to administer morphine shots. A few neighbors bring pork and fish and cake. There are times when Small Man eats it all, and there are times when he sits in the metal chair searching his memory for an affirmation, but nothing comes. And then there is just waiting, which can be the cruelest of things.

On the sixth day, her breathing is shallower and her skin wets, and Small Man thinks it's impossible that she has any fluid left in her but blood, and maybe not even that. Auntie stays in the living room, kneeling on the hardwood floor, shredding and weaving ti leaves into

strands, a kanawai to ward off the evil spirits who prey upon the vulnerable. And that night, through the ticking fan he can hear the wind pick up. It whistles along the shutter slats. Then the rain begins, first in time with the ticking then quickly rising above until there is only a roar off the tin roof. When Small Man looks to his mother, her eyes are open, blinking. Then she's holding her arms over her face and screams and it's the only sound he can hear over the rain.

“Sista,” Auntie yells, pressing herself tight under Small Man’s arm.

“Help me,” his mother says, “No can, the rain.”

Auntie is saying back to her that there is no rain inside the house, that they are protected, but she keeps on and Auntie keeps on back, occasionally trying to pin her sister’s arms to show her there is nothing but the sound. They scream back and forth, Auntie becoming maniacal. Small Man hurries to the front door where an umbrella hangs from a two-penny nail. He pulls Auntie away so hard she stumbles to the wall then runs out of the room. He opens the umbrella right above his mother’s head, and says, “Ma. It’s okay.” He’s meeting her eye to eye, staring into her now, repeating "it's okay, it's okay," a drone.

Slowly, her twitching subsides. Her face, once a contorted, purple mash, unfolds.

Her eyes lagger until she is not blinking at all, until she looks away and stares at the ceiling. Her chest isn’t moving, and he worries she’s passed. Then the rain eases, and, once again, he can hear the fan

and, past that, the low mumblings of Auntie in the living room. And just as Small Man thinks it's happened, that the time has come with all its sadness and relief, she clasps her hands together, resting them on her chin—not as a prayer, but as a blessing.

“Boy, you my roof.”

Small Man knows he's been given the only affirmation he'll ever need, that he could stand there for days, for weeks, past the shaking and sweating, his body consuming all his fat, his muscles becoming stone, until his skin sags in great folds, until his toe nails have grown into the floor.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**M**ATTHEW R. K. HAYNES is the author of the novella, *Friday*. Recently, his writing has appeared in *West Branch* and *The Normal School*. He has been a finalist for the William Faulkner Award, Glimmer Train Short Short Story Award, Tobias Wolff Award, and runner-up for the Tennessee Williams Award and ScreenCraft Cinematic Short Story Award.. Matthew was a Lambda Literary Fiction Fellow in 2017, and a 2018 Lambda Literary Fiction Writer-in-Residence. He lives in Butte, MT.



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