

Prologue

According to neighbors, Father was a difficult man. He did not talk much, pulling down his mouth as if considering something important. But everyone agreed that if something is important, it's either in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin* or, at the very least, the talk of the town. Their salty neighbor was probably just making things up in his head, constructing thoughts as inconsequential as cigarette smoke, diminishing their fellow feeling. Nothing galls friendly neighbors more than the stubborn silence of another, setting itself apart from sunny greetings and daily gossip. The man's muteness seemed to suggest that everybody else was playfully splashing around in bubbly, shallow waters, the safety of white foam on white sands, too much at ease in the island's heat and humidity. The man's stillness gathered around him, enlarging the space between him and others.

After too many beers, other men made vows to publicly insult their silent neighbor while their wives claimed that nobody, not a single one, could resist the latest news, Arthur Godfrey is coming to town! With his hit songs and ukulele!

Almost everybody had a television or knew somebody who had one. There was so much to be glad about—the boys home from the European and Pacific fronts, GI loans for houses and cars. Now it was war in Korea, with General MacArthur flying in and out, saluting on the tarmac of Hickam Field, predicting victory.

After years of curfew and blackouts, local folks were ready to start over, find a way to make do with what was left, joke about how good Spam and rice tasted with the right seasonings. Only in their beds, out of earshot of their children, did grownups wonder out loud. Why Korea? Was this some kind of unfinished business? Why were we fighting on the ground, letting them stick our boys?

An island in the middle of the ocean is a small world. Ancient Hawaiians prayed for stasis, the counterpoise of dark brown land and bright blue water, wishing only for the give and take of the tides to continue as before, even as we sleep. Radio, television, even the neighbors' relentless commentary on Keaniani Lane and all of its inhabitants, scrambled words until all was noise, nothing Father could read or pronounce. It took packs of cigarettes and occasional strong drink to let it all go. After all, even a proud man must unlock his stiff neck before going to bed. Like the ox who lowers his head to submit to the yoke, this man allowed his wife to take his heavy head onto her breast.

He lived in a small, crowded house. The best he could do was pull the shades, go fishing.

Neighbors talked among themselves, sipping instant coffee. That man came back from the war in Europe with no stories to tell. How was it possible to go so far away and return empty handed? When he was in Italy, did he eat spaghetti? Say “Ciao, baby”? What about his buddies? He did not speak of the war, even after heavy food and drink.

Not only that, he did not fish with respect for the sport. Instead of live bait and casting into the sea, he seeded his waters with bread bombs, setting up easy pickings for the next day. A real fisherman would not do this. Bread bombs attract huge swirls of otherwise restless, wily fish, tempting them to stick around for more. What happened to the notion of hard work and honesty in all things? Who was he kidding? And his family was in on it—he even taught his son how to make bombs.

Their house was an embarrassment to the neighborhood. Ticky tacky additions. Yellowed front yard. And a pink cement driveway. Neighbors were looking for more, quoting the governor, “a better life in beautiful Hawaii.” Only a fool would argue with swaying palm trees and clear skies. And the children were getting taller, smarter than their parents. The aloha spirit was rising, friendly word-of-mouth almost guaranteed some kind of happiness. Far above the islands, the great gyre gathered speed, a beneficent first cause of gentle rain and cooling trade winds. Some said it was God’s breath moving across the waters.

But war had accelerated and multiplied everything; there was so much out there. No longer did anyone remember or bother to wish for a small peaceable kingdom. And this fool? He looked like a fool—in baggy pants and holey shirt, a dumb work horse, unyielding to the good news of the day.

—from *If You Live in a Small House*

