

The Goddamn Milky Way

“You should make it down to the beach while the sun is still up. There’s a hurricane on the far side of the island, so the waves are huge tonight,” Maureen, the owner of the B&B, said to me as she poured some coffee into her porcelain mug. We were standing in the kitchen, one of many tropically colored rooms in her large, refurbished house. I watched as she sipped on her steaming beverage and couldn’t help but wonder what kind of crazy you had to be to fiend for such a hot drink while bustling around an estate like this with no AC and a temperature that rested at just above 80 degrees. And, encouraging someone to go outside *because* there was a natural disaster? It was more than slightly out of the ordinary to me, but I guess spending your entire life on the Big Island gets you accustomed to things that growing up in the Midwest does not. Although a little intimidating, my curiosity was getting the best of me, so I decided to follow her suggestion.

The humidity wasn’t something I had expected, and going from a crisp plane to the thick, sticky air in Hawaii was a mildly uncomfortable adjustment, so I stepped into my own room to change. The walls were a vibrant shade of peach, and lush, green plants accented the room. Chartreuse lizards dashed from the window sill to cracks in the walls and the humming of local birds and insects drifted through the open window. I’d only been in Hilo for a few hours, and Maureen’s lovely establishment was all I had seen after getting off my plane. But, I could feel something rising in my chest. That kind of feeling that comes when you just know you are about to experience something truly amazing.

Sandals, for some reason, had been left off my checklist, and the looks I received as I strolled down the blacktop in cut-off shorts and my old, clunky combat boots would have probably made me insecure in any other circumstance, but not this time. Eighteen years old and thousands of miles from home, today was the day I was stepping out into the world. The past year had been one long disaster for me. I’d broken up with my abusive boyfriend, wasn’t doing much as far as school was concerned, and really the only thing I had going for me was how hard I’d worked to save money to get here. My view of the world, myself, and whether any of this life was worth living fell heavily on the negative side. But, today there wasn’t a judgmental glare in the world that could yank my head out of the palm trees. My walk was short, and I was so busy studying the unique houses and shrubbery that surrounded them I almost passed the beach. Cars pulling out of a small parking lot alerted me that I had arrived. I turned to the right and started to make my way through the gardens that led to Carlsmith Beach. Everywhere I turned was more beautiful than the last. The trees were tall and lush, the grass plush, and a small pond sat amongst it all. Large stepping stones led into the small body of water so you could walk across with ease. I snapped a few pictures and continued moving until the jungle gave way, and that grass turned to coal-colored lava rock. I could finally see what all the buzz was about; crackled, ebony, stone jutted from the land into the brightest water I had

ever seen. The waves, just like Maureen predicted, were enormous. Twenty-foot walls of water jumped into the air and crashed down onto the tree-speckled shore across from me. A concrete stair case with a rickety bannister led down into the water, and if it hadn't been for the waves, I might have followed it in. Instead, I moved along the shore, further toward the bay where the waves couldn't quite reach. Speckled and striped fish alike were darting back and forth through the calmer water. They were accompanied by tiny black crabs that scuttled across the rocks and even a large, green sea turtle who drifted lazily around the bay. I'd never seen anything like this, a place that radiated so heavily with life. Lizards, birds, insects and other wildlife bustled around in the tropical landscape. I climbed up onto an empty lifeguard tower that overlooked it all, turned on some music and watched as the sun started to sink behind me, casting golden tones onto the water. This feeling began to take over as I gazed across the ocean; that sensation that spreads through your body and fills your chest so much that you think your heart could burst at any moment. I let myself melt away into that paradise, that feeling, until the sun went to sleep, and I began my march back to Maureen's.

Morning came quickly, and I awoke to the smell of blueberry pancakes wafting into my room. I pulled myself out of bed and shuffled into the dining room where Maureen was setting her long table. At the front of it was a big cup of some mysterious, orange fruit and a spinning carousel of flavored syrups for the pancakes she was setting down for me. I thanked her for the breakfast while I twirled the syrup rack. Raspberry, pineapple, strawberry guava, the list went on and on. What the hell was a guava? I had no clue, but I found myself pouring the thick liquid onto my pancakes anyway while Maureen talked to me about how different life was in Hawaii and what I should expect. Prices were higher here, she told me, but the lifestyle was different. People here had a laidback approach to life that differed from the "mainlanders," as she called them. I had no doubt that she was telling the truth. I could only imagine how different my demeanor would be living in a place as magical as this. I chowed down on the mystery fruit, which I later discovered to be papaya, as she continued with suggestions of where to go and things to see. I nodded and was thankful for her advice, but I already knew where I was headed. I was about to spend the next month volunteering in an eco-village, living in a tiny pop-up camper in the middle of the rainforest and trading my work for cheap board. After thanking her for my breakfast, I decided to walk down to see the beach before 11am rolled around. I needed to be back by then, packed and ready to go, because an intern from Hedonesia, the village I was staying at, would be there to pick me up. I swore I'd keep an eye on the clock, but wrapped up in the ocean again, I found myself running down the pavement back towards the B&B hoping I'd make it there before he did. I was relieved when I finally reached the empty driveway. Still heaving from my run, I forced myself up Maureen's steps and into my room. I had just enough time to shove my things into my poor, overpacked suitcase before I heard the front door slam. I turned around to see the intern standing in the next room. He was a lean guy with a neatly shaved head and a face that said, "I really didn't want to spend my day being a taxi, but here I

am." I couldn't help but snicker at the dissatisfaction on his face as I introduced myself and watched as he tried to haul my overpacked suitcase to his car. After we pulled the last bag up into the hatch, we were off.

The drive wasn't as our initial interaction had seemed. A few minutes in the car together, and the intern and I started to warm up to one another. We exchanged our brief introductions, and he told me about how long he'd been in Hawaii and the best things he'd seen. The drive was beautiful but not very long. Soon enough, we were pulling up to Hedo. The entrance was overgrown with towering grasses, shrubs, and brightly colored flowers. The driveway passed a small cottage and led to a large barn with open doors; an outdoor kitchen and a living space with couches was attached to the back. He parked his car next to this, and we hopped out. The check-in process began, and in no time another intern and I were dragging my massive bags down to my little camper that lay down a hill behind the kitchen. As I made my way to it, I took in my surroundings. Hedonesia, you see, used to be a junkyard and had been purchased by Mojo, a fan of eco-friendly living, who had seen potential in the overgrown dump. He hired people to help clear out as much junk as he could and used what couldn't be taken away to create the village. I remember reading about this when I was looking for a place in which to escape. There was a painted school bus filled with beds, small lodges built from guava plants, and even a tent on a raised platform. There was no electricity except for that in the barn, and the only bathroom was back up the hill. The set up was interesting, to say the least. Finally, I reached my destination, a small pop-up that had been brightly painted and sat snugly in seclusion, wrapped up in plants. I pulled my things inside and plopped down on the thin mattress prepared for me. I was finally here. I gave myself a few moments to take it all in, and then started to unpack. I couldn't help but let my mind wonder about what would come next.

My first two days in the camp were free from obligation, so I could settle in and catch up on my sleep. The third day, however, was my first work day. By the time I was done, I had been bitten by what seemed like every fire ant on the island. I was so covered in sweat and dirt that I didn't dare sit on anything until I had a chance to shower. Even that was an adventure. The shower, like everything else, was made with the environment in mind. It was heated by a solar panel and sat outside! A rickety wooden barricade made up three of the walls, and the fourth was a large lava flow that had hardened many years before. There were plants in the shower and stretching out over the walls that made a canopy. It was surreal to stand in the water while looking up at the sky. When I finished admiring the view and soothing my plethora of ant bites, I passed the shower onto the next person and began preparing for the evening. I'd been invited by the first intern I'd met, Chris, to go to a festival on the beach along with four other new volunteers like myself. It took awhile to gather us all, but after managing to herd everyone into the car, we were off.

Uncle Roberts was a Pahoia tradition, Chris began explaining to us as we bounced down the bumpy back roads on our way to the festival. It had started many years ago when Uncle

Robert himself would throw parties on his property, and after he passed, the tradition continued and grew. I could hear the music long before I could see where it was coming from, and as we got nearer, the sounds became heavier. Chris explained that the expanse of lava flow that lay to our left had all been a town years ago and had been covered up when one of the volcanoes erupted. Eventually we came to an entrance that led us onto the black rock itself. I began to see more cars and people walking towards a multitude of booths and a gargantuan pavilion to my right. In front of us, however, all you could see for miles was the hardened rock, black sand, pineapple plants, and the ocean that roared with the same tenacity as it had my first day. After parking and spending some time staring out at the enormous waves, we all made our way towards the music. Anything you could think of, they had a booth for. Tables full of food, mostly native or small-business owned, jewelry, rocks, crafts, handmade items, and clothing were strewn out before us. There was a bar and a stage where the music I'd been hearing was coming from. Everywhere you looked, people were singing and dancing along to the band. I spent plenty of time weaving my way through it all and going back again to make sure I hadn't missed anything. As the night wound down we all made our way back to the car. Laughter filled the vehicle as we shared what we'd seen, and Chris sped down the snake-like roads. "Do you guys want to see something really cool?" he asked and veered suddenly off onto the side of the road. "You can see the Milky Way from here," he said and we all stumbled out of the car, turning our gazes upward. He was right; you could see the galaxies from here. "It's the goddamn Milky Way!" one of us exclaimed in a slightly slurred voice, and like a chorus we all started shouting into the sky. It was a beautiful night, and Uncle Roberts became a tradition of mine, too. Every Wednesday we gathered ourselves and headed up there. Sometimes Chris and I would disappear from the others to sit on the beach. We'd listen to the waves crashing down as we talked about life and sipped rum out of coconuts we'd picked up from one of the vendors. In those moments, life seemed surreal. Everything I'd left back home disappeared into the night sky, and the only thing I felt was my chest filling to the brim with that feeling of awe.

I went on several adventures in my short month in Hawaii. We went to Kona, the far side of the island, and snuck into resorts. We visited tide pools, swam around with the fishes and went to waterfalls and forests. We even drove to Green Sands Beach, on the southern most tip of the island, where we hiked 45 minutes just to see the olive-colored shore. The group changed, some people left, and others were added, but the constant factors were Chris, myself, and that overwhelming feeling of pure happiness. In the blink of an eye, my time was up. I had to go home, face my problems, and return to everyday life. The idea was taxing, and the only part of my trip that I didn't enjoy. I spent the morning of my departure with Chris, and he treated me to coffee. I couldn't tell what he was thinking as we sat there, silently staring at one another. All I know is that the grip on my cup was the only thing that kept me from bawling in the middle of Starbucks that day. The time for my flight crept closer and closer, and as we made our way to the airport I tried to focus on those last few moments in this wonderland.

I held back my tears as I hugged Chris goodbye, not allowing them to fall until I had boarded my plane. Despite them, as we went up into the sky, and I watched the islands grow tinier and tinier, I couldn't help but smile. Regardless of how melancholy I felt about leaving, that pressure in my chest remained, and I began to understand what I was feeling. Hope, true happiness, and most of all, thankfulness. I was thankful that, in my time prior to coming here, I had not given up on myself. Had I made some different choices, stayed in my shell or decided life just wasn't worth it, I would never have experienced any of this. I'd not have seen the shining black sand beaches, watched the sun set over the water, or stayed up all night forming bonds with strangers like Chris (who remains my best friend to this day). It was then that I realized something very important. Life is always going to be difficult and terrifying. Far too often it will make you feel like being a part of it all just too daunting, but it's worth it.

Even now, I sometimes struggle with believing that life is worth living. The world can be a heavy burden. Carrying on can seem impossible, and I can't just hop on a plane and disappear on an island every time life gets rough. However, I don't have to fly all the way to Hawaii because I know something very important now. The reason we keep carrying on, the reason we stand back up when we are knocked down, is so that we have the chance to experience those beautiful moments and meet those amazing people. You never know what the future holds, whether it will be lovely or tragic, but if you aren't willing to take the risk, you might miss out on seeing the goddamn milky way.