Fa Samoa
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Barreling down the only paved street in Apia, nausea floods my stomach. Momentarily, I turn to Joe sitting beside me, his arms stretched wide along the top of the car seat, knees jarred deeply into the cushion of the driver’s chair, neck craned backwards, eyelids closed.

The last rest stop was a deserted resort along the ocean shore. A visitor here could see that this now haunting building once beamed with extravagance. Rod, Marcus, Joe, and I drug our bodies from the car. Rod and Marcus searched for a bathroom.

“I feel like a flippin’ intruder,” I remarked, trying to shake off the discomfort of silence.

“I wonder what the hell happened here. There’s an eerie feeling of loss.” Joe looked beyond me toward the vacant parking lot behind us.

“This isn’t what I imagined when Rod mentioned taking a staff vacation to Western Samoa. We’ve driven half way around the damn island to stop once for a bathroom break—forget about stopping for pictures! And why partake in any physical activities, like snorkeling or hiking, when we can drive around for hours looking for a restaurant, so we can eat like Samoans and drink like fish?”

Joe laughed and nodded toward the road. “Our van just got here.”

“Well, let’s get the hell outta here. It’s bad enough riding in the death mobile with Marcus and Rod, don’t let them take me into the van! Jason is trying to force me to take his seat in the van which would be surprisingly more terrifying than Marcus’s driving.”

“You guys ready?” Rod smiled. Marcus was already in the driver’s seat, sun glasses on, ready to fly.

“Lisa, do you have any aspirin?”

Joe’s question annoyed me. “No, don’t you think I’d be taking it?”

“This is going to be a long drive.” Joe rolled his eyes, and we begrudgingly retreated to the car, before the rest of our group exited their van. The ocean swelled, and the sky darkened.

Fixing my gaze on a point in front of us, I too, try mirroring Joe’s reclined position, however awkwardly, in the back of our car. A friend told me, back in high school, that driving a convertible seventy miles per hour, prevents the upholstery from getting wet in a storm. Reality contradicted this notion forty-five minutes ago. Our Jeep flies through the Samoan country side at eighty-five as the dousing rain pounds against windows and wind shield. Rushing, flaming colors of hibiscus bushes, tinned roofs, and palm trees spiral past us and out of sight. Another wave of nausea washes over me.

“STOP!” Abruptly, the pumping breaks hurl me against the seatbelt tearing the skin along my color bone. My entire body rises and falls, thrown into the air, thrown down to the seat. My blood swells, forming bruises.

I distinctively remember waking up the morning after our arrival to hear a raging storm surge against our sheet metal roof. Throughout the morning and into the afternoon surges and downpours saturated the already spongy grass. Tropical storms erupted suddenly and frequently in Samoa, flooding streets and fields feet high. Sometimes they would last for a full week, others would dissipate within minutes. We rose at noon and
prepared to visit the department of education for the first time. Joe and I were unknowingly embarking on a tropical trek to DOE in what we assumed was customary, professional attire. Joe dressed in heavy kaki cargo pants, and black silk tie. I wore my embroidered white knee skirt with strappy heeled sandals. We schlepped over gravel roads and muddy fields. Ladled in dirt and sea rain, we exhaustedly entered DOE, staring awkwardly at officials in shorts and flip-flops.

“What?” Rod shouted while throwing open his door.

Panic ensues. Eluded by the Samoan meaning of their language, the urgency is petrifying. The inadequacy of my Samoan vocabulary kills me. I don’t understand. All happens in a dismal second, all slurring together as my eyes flash open. Horrified screaming as children bawl, piercing the storm with their petrifying terror.

“Car now! Get in the car!”

“Now!”

A flash. An elderly man mistakenly plops down on my right thigh with such force that his delicate, paper thin frame folds and pinches my leg with pain. His arms cradle something very small between them. Then an instant of hesitation as the startling recognition sets in. Across my thigh, lie several strips of gleaming black hair, smooth and slimy like leaches from a pond.

“Lisa, out!” Rod slams the door as Joe leaps from the car. Mystified, I freeze as her head bobbles on my leg, I recoil at once. “Let’s go!” Clawing at the seat, I rush from the car as quickly as the old man entered. More doors slam as the car jolts beyond our sight.

Faui hired Joe and me eight months ago, without interview, without conversation: just fax your credentials to DOE. Take the twenty hour flight to Minneapolis, then Los Angeles, then Honolulu, then Tafuna, Samoa. There was no explanation of expectations, no conversation of culture, not even a what to expect that you’re not expecting. All the sights and sounds newly unfolded like flipping between pages of *National Geographic*, and uncovering the untouched tribal nations of Africa. I wished my mom was here to witness firsthand the horses tethered to trees, adults who bought groceries from shacks along the street, and children fishing beside the ocean with long sticks used as spears. I bought every book published about the South Pacific before leaving Wisconsin. The average temperature in Samoa ranges between 80 and 85. The rocky, coal beaches drastically differ from the soft, sandy shores of Florida. Dangerous currents create undertows, frequently drowning even experienced, expert swimmers. But none of these facts compared to life.

Our drenched clothes hang from our bodies, and Joe and I stand in the middle of the street, silently transfixed first on the crowd of bemoaning children before us then ourselves. I already knew, but it didn’t keep me from asking,

“Joe, what was he holding?”

Joe literally bites his lip. He searches my eyes.

“What was he holding?

We stood still. And still stood.

“A girl,” Joe rasped.

“Joe, the smell,” I couldn’t finish because I didn’t know how. It was of pungent, rotting seaweed and of corpses.

One by one the children left us.