



# Barbarian Days

# A Surfing Life

William  
Finnegan



Grajagan, Java, 1979

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*A Surfing Life*

WILLIAM FINNEGAN

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*for Mollie*

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He had become so caught up in building sentences that he had almost forgotten the barbaric days when thinking was like a splash of colour landing on a page.

—EDWARD ST. AUBYN, *Mother's Milk*

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## ONE

# OFF DIAMOND HEAD

*Honolulu, 1966–67*

I HAD NEVER THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS A SHELTERED CHILD. STILL, Kaimuki Intermediate School was a shock. We had just moved to Honolulu, I was in the eighth grade, and most of my new schoolmates were “drug addicts, glue sniffers, and hoods”—or so I wrote to a friend back in Los Angeles. That wasn’t true. What was true was that haoles (white people; I was one of them) were a tiny and unpopular minority at Kaimuki. The “natives,” as I called them, seemed to dislike us particularly. That was unnerving because many of the Hawaiians were, for junior-high kids, alarmingly large, and the word was that they liked to fight. Orientals—again, my terminology—were the school’s biggest ethnic group. In those first weeks I didn’t distinguish between Japanese and Chinese and Korean kids—they were all Orientals to me. Nor did I note the existence of other important tribes, such as the Filipinos, the Samoans, or the Portuguese (not considered haoles), let alone all the kids of mixed ethnic background. I probably even thought the big guy in wood shop who immediately took a sadistic interest in me was Hawaiian.

He wore shiny black shoes with long sharp toes, tight pants, and bright flowered shirts. His kinky hair was cut in a pompadour, and he looked like he had been shaving since birth. He rarely spoke, and then only in a pidgin unintelligible to me. He was some kind of junior mobster, clearly years behind his original class, just biding his time until he could drop out. His name was Freitas—I never heard a first name—but he didn’t seem to be related to the Freitas clan, a vast family with a number of rambunctious boys at Kaimuki Intermediate. The stiletto-toed Freitas studied me frankly for a few days, making me increasingly nervous, and then began to conduct little assaults on my self-possession, softly bumping my elbow, for example, while I concentrated over a saw cut on my half-built shoe-shine box.

I was too scared to say anything, and he never said a word to me. That seemed to be part of the fun. Then he settled on a crude but ingenious amusement to pass those periods when we had to sit in chairs in the classroom part of the shop. He would sit behind me and, whenever the teacher had his back turned, would hit me on the head with a two-by-four. *Bonk . . . bonk . . . bonk*, a nice steady rhythm, always with enough of a pause between blows to allow me brief hope that there might not be another. I couldn’t understand why the teacher didn’t hear all these unauthorized, resonating clonks. They were loud enough to attract the attention of our classmates, who seemed to find Freitas’s little ritual fascinating. Inside my head the blows were, of course, bone-rattling explosions. Freitas used a fairly long board—five or six feet—and he never hit too hard, which allowed him to pound away to his heart’s content without leaving marks, and to do it from a certain rarefied, even meditative distance, which added, I imagine, to the fascination of the performance.

I wonder if, had some other kid been targeted, I would have been as passive as my classmates were. Probably so. The teacher was off in his own world, worried only about his table saws. I did nothing in my own defense. While I eventually understood that Freitas wasn’t Hawaiian, I must have figured I

just had to take the abuse. I was, after all, skinny and haole and had no friends.

My parents had sent me to Kaimuki Intermediate, I later decided, under a misconception. This was 1966, and the California public school system, particularly in the middle-class suburbs where we had lived, was among the nation's best. The families we knew never considered private schools for their kids. Hawaii's public schools were another matter—impoverished, mired in colonial, plantation, and mission traditions, miles below the American average academically.

You would not have known that, though, from the elementary school my younger siblings attended (Kevin was nine, Colleen seven. Michael was three and, in that pre-preschool era, still exempt from formal education.) We had rented a house on the edge of a wealthy neighborhood called Kahala, and Kahala Elementary was a well-funded little haven of progressive education. Except for the fact that the children were allowed to go to school barefoot—an astonishing piece of tropical permissiveness, we thought—Kahala Elementary could have been in a genteel precinct of Santa Monica. Tellingly, however, Kahala had no junior high. That was because every family in the area that could possibly manage it sent its kids to the private secondary schools that have for generations educated Honolulu's (and much of the rest of Hawaii's) middle class, along with its rich folk.

Ignorant of all this, my parents sent me to the nearest junior high, up in working-class Kaimuki, on the back side of Diamond Head crater, where they assumed I was getting on with the business of the eighth grade, but where in fact I was occupied almost entirely by the rigors of bullies, loneliness, fights, and finding my way, after a lifetime of unconscious whiteness in the segregated suburbs of California, in a racialized world. Even my classes felt racially constructed. For academic subjects, at least, students were assigned, on the basis of test scores, to a group that moved together from teacher to teacher. I was put in a high-end group, where nearly all my classmates were Japanese girls. There were no Hawaiians, no Samoans, no Filipinos, and the classes themselves, which were prim and undemanding, bored me in a way that school never had before. Matters weren't helped by the fact that to my classmates, I seemed not to exist socially. And so I passed the class hours slouched in back rows, keeping an eye on the trees outside for signs of wind direction and strength, drawing page after page of surfboards and waves.

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I HAD BEEN SURFING for three years by the time my father got the job that took us to Hawaii. He had been working, mostly as an assistant director, in series television—*Dr. Kildare*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Now he was the production manager on a new series, a half-hour musical variety show based on a local radio program, *Hawaii Calls*. The idea was to shoot Don Ho singing in a glass-bottomed boat, a calypso band by a waterfall, hula girls dancing while a volcano spewed, and call it a show. “It won't be the Hawaiian Amateur Hour,” my father said. “But close.”

“If it's really bad, we'll pretend we don't know you,” my mother said. “Bill *who*?”

The budget for moving us all to Honolulu was tight, judging from the tiny cottage we rented (Kevin and I took turns sleeping on the couch) and the rusted-out old Ford we bought to get around. But the cottage was near the beach—just up a driveway lined with other cottages, on a street called Kulamano—and the weather, which was warm even in January, when we arrived, felt like wanton luxury.

I was beside myself with excitement just to be in Hawaii. All surfers, all readers of surf magazine—and I had memorized nearly every line, every photo caption, in every surf magazine I owned—spent the bulk of their fantasy lives, like it or not, in Hawaii. And now I was there, walking on actual Hawaiian sand (coarse, strange-smelling), tasting Hawaiian seawater (warm, strange-smelling), and paddling toward Hawaiian waves (small, dark-faced, windblown).

Nothing was what I'd expected. In the mags, Hawaiian waves were always big and, in the color

shots, ranged from deep, mid-ocean blue to a pale, impossible turquoise. The wind was always offshore (blowing from land to sea, ideal for surfing), and the breaks themselves were the Olympian playgrounds of the gods: Sunset Beach, the Banzai Pipeline, Makaha, Ala Moana, Waimea Bay.

All of that seemed worlds away from the sea in front of our house. Even Waikiki, known for its beginner breaks and tourist crowds, was over on the far side of Diamond Head—the glamorous, iconic western side—along with every other part of Honolulu anybody had heard of. We were on the mountain’s southeast side, down in a little saddle of sloping, shady beachfront west of Black Point. The beach was just a patch of damp sand, narrow and empty.

On the afternoon of our arrival, during my first, frantic survey of the local waters, I found the surf setup confusing. Waves broke here and there along the outer edge of a mossy, exposed reef. I was worried by all the coral. It was infamously sharp. Then I spotted, well off to the west, and rather far out at sea, a familiar minuet of stick figures, rising and falling, backlit by the afternoon sun. Surfers! ran back up the lane. Everyone at the house was busy unpacking and fighting over beds. I threw on a pair of trunks, grabbed my board, and left without a word.

I paddled west along a shallow lagoon, staying close to the shore, for half a mile. The beach house ended, and the steep, brushy base of Diamond Head itself took their place across the sand. Then the reef on my left fell away, revealing a wide channel—deeper water, where no waves broke—and beyond the channel ten or twelve surfers riding a scatter of dark, chest-high peaks in a moderate onshore wind. I paddled slowly toward the lineup—the wave-catching zone—taking a roundabout route, studying every ride. The surfers were good. They all had smooth, ungimmicky styles. Nobody fell off. And nobody, blessedly, seemed to notice me.

I circled around, then edged into an unpopulated stretch of the lineup. There were plenty of waves. The takeoffs were crumbling but easy. Letting muscle memory take over, I caught and rode a couple of small, mushy rights. The waves were different—but not too different—from the waves I knew in California. They were shifty but not intimidating. I could see coral on the bottom, but except for a couple of heads poking up far inside (near shore), nothing too shallow.

There was a lot of talk and laughter among the other surfers. Eavesdropping, I couldn’t understand a word. They were probably speaking pidgin. I had read about pidgin in James Michener’s *Hawaii* but with my debut at Kaimuki Intermediate still a day away, hadn’t actually heard any yet. Or maybe it was some foreign language. I was the only haole (another word from Michener) in the water. At one point, an older guy paddling past me gestured seaward and said, “Outside.” It was the only word spoken to me that day. And he was right: an outside set was approaching, the biggest of the afternoon, and I was grateful to have been warned.

As the sun dropped, the crowd thinned. I tried to see where people went. Most seemed to take a steep path up the mountainside to Diamond Head Road, their pale boards, carried on their heads, moving steadily, skeg-first, through the switchbacks. I caught a final wave, rode it into the shallows, and began the long paddle home through the lagoon. Lights were on in the houses now. The air was cooler, the shadows blue-black under the coconut palms along the shore. I was aglow with my good fortune. I just wished I had someone to tell: *I’m in Hawaii, surfing in Hawaii*. Then it occurred to me that I didn’t even know the name of the place I’d surfed.

•••

IT WAS CALLED CLIFFS. It was a patchwork arc of reefs that ran south and west for half a mile from the channel where I first paddled out. To learn any new spot in surfing, you first bring to bear your knowledge of other breaks—all the other waves you’ve learned to read closely. But at that stage my complete archives consisted of ten or fifteen California spots, and only one I really knew well: a

cobblestone point in Ventura. And none of this experience prepared me especially well for Cliffs, which, after that initial session, I tried to surf twice a day.

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Path to the water, Kulamanu house, 1966

It was a remarkably consistent spot, in the sense that there were nearly always waves to ride, even in what I came to understand was the off-season for Oahu's South Shore. The reefs off Diamond Head are at the southern extremity of the island, and thus pick up every scrap of passing swell. But they also catch a lot of wind, including local williwaws off the slopes of the crater, and the wind, along with the vast jigsaw expanse of the reef and the swells arriving from many different points of the compass, combined to produce constantly changing conditions that, in a paradox I didn't appreciate at the time

amounted to a rowdy, hourly refutation of the idea of consistency. Cliffs possessed a moody complexity beyond anything I had known.

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Mornings were particularly confounding. To squeeze in a surf before school, I had to be out there by daybreak. In my narrow experience the sea was supposed to be glassy at dawn. In coastal California, that is, early mornings are usually windless. Not so, apparently, in the tropics. Certainly not at Cliffs. At sunrise the trade winds often blew hard. Palm fronds thrashed overhead as I tripped down the lane, waxed board on my head, and from the seafront I could see whitecaps outside, beyond the reef, spilling east to west on a royal-blue ocean. The trades were said to be northeasterlies, which was not a bad direction, in theory, for a south-facing coast, but somehow they were always sideshore at Cliffs, and strong enough to ruin most spots from that angle.

And yet the place had a kind of growling durability that left it ridable, at least for my purposes, even in those battered conditions. Almost no one else surfed it in the early morning, which made it a good time to explore the main takeoff area. I began to learn the tricky, fast, shallow sections, and the soft spots where a quick cutback was needed to keep a ride going. Even on a waist-high, blown-out day, it was possible to milk certain waves for long, improvised, thoroughly satisfying rides. The reef had a thousand quirks, which changed quickly with the tide. And when the inshore channel began to turn a milky turquoise—a color not unlike some of the Hawaiian fantasy waves in the mags—it meant I came to know, that the sun had risen to the point where I should head in for breakfast. If the tide was extra low, leaving the lagoon too shallow to paddle, I learned to allow more time for trudging home on the soft, coarse sand, struggling to keep my board's nose pointed into the wind.

Afternoons were a different story. The wind was usually lighter, the sea less seasick, and there were other people surfing. Cliffs had a crew of regulars. After a few sessions, I could recognize some of them. At the mainland spots I knew, there was usually a limited supply of waves, a lot of jockeying for position, and a strictly observed pecking order. A youngster, particularly one lacking allies, such as an older brother, needed to be careful not to cross, even inadvertently, any local big dogs. But at Cliffs there was so much room to spread out, so many empty peaks breaking off to the west of the main takeoff—or, if you kept an eye out, perhaps on an inside shelf that had quietly started to work—that I felt free to pursue my explorations of the margins. Nobody bothered me. Nobody vibed me. It was the opposite of my life at school.

• • •

MY ORIENTATION PROGRAM at school included a series of fistfights, some of them formally scheduled. There was a cemetery next to the campus, with a well-hidden patch of grass down in one corner where kids went to settle their differences. I found myself facing off there with a number of boys named Freitas—none of them, again, apparently related to my hairy tormentor from wood shop. My first opponent was so small and young that I doubted he was even at our school. The Freitas clan's method for training its members in battle, it seemed, was to find some fool without allies or the brains to avoid a challenge, then send their youngest fighter with any chance at all into the ring. If he lost, the next biggest Freitas would be sent in. This went on until the nonkinsman was defeated. It was all quite dispassionate, the bouts arranged and refereed by older Freitases, and more or less fairly conducted.

My first match was sparsely attended—really of no interest to anyone—but I was still scared sick, having no seconds in my corner and no idea what the rules were. My opponent turned out to be shockingly strong for his size, and ferocious, but his arms were too short to land punches, and I eventually subdued him without much damage to either of us. His cousin, who stepped up immediately, was more my size, and our sparring was more consequential. I held my own, but we both had shiners before a senior Freitas stepped in, declaring a draw. There would be a rematch, he said,

and if I won that, somebody named Tino would come and kick my ass, no questions asked. Team Freitas departed. I remember watching them jog, laughing and loose, a happy family militia, up the long slope of the graveyard. They were evidently late for another appointment. My face hurt, my knuckles hurt, but I was giddy with relief. Then I noticed a couple of haole guys my age standing in the bushes at the edge of the clearing, looking squirrely. I half recognized them from school, but they left without saying a word.

I won the rematch, I think. Then Tino kicked my ass, no questions asked.

There were more fights, including a multiday brawl with a Chinese kid in my agriculture class who refused to give up even when I had his face shoved deep in the red mud of the lettuce patch. This bitter tussle went on for a week. It resumed each afternoon, and never produced a winner. The other boys in the class, enjoying the show, made sure that the teacher, if he ever came round, didn't catch us at it.

I don't know what my parents thought. Cuts and bruises, even black eyes, could be explained. Football, surfing, something. My hunch, which seems right in retrospect, was that they couldn't help, so I told them nothing.

A racist gang came to my rescue. They called themselves the In Crowd. They were haoles and, the laughable gang name notwithstanding, they were impressively bad. Their leader was a jolly, dissolute, hoarse-voiced, broken-toothed kid named Mike. He was not physically imposing, but he shambled around school with a rowdy fearlessness that seemed to give everyone but the largest Samoans pause. Mike's true home, one came to understand, was a juvenile detention center somewhere—this schoolgoing was just a furlough, which he intended to make the most of. He had a younger sister, Edie, who was blond and skinny and wild, and their house in Kaimuki was the In Crowd's clubhouse. At school they gathered under a tall monkeypod tree on a red-dirt hill behind the unpainted bungalow where I took typing. My induction was informal. Mike and his buddies simply let me know I was welcome to join them under the monkeypod. And it was from the In Crowd kids, who actually seemed to include more girls than boys, that I began to learn, first, the broad outlines, and then the minutiae, of the local racial setup. Our main enemies, I came to know, were the "mokes"—which seemed to mean anyone dark and tough.

"You been beefin' with mokes already," Mike told me.

That was true, I realized.

But my fighting career soon tailed off. People seemed to know I was now part of the haole gang, and elected to pick on other kids. Even Freitas in wood shop started easing up on me. But had he really put away his two-by-four? It was hard to imagine he would be worried by the In Crowd.

• • •

DISCREETLY, I STUDIED the surfing of some of the regulars at Cliffs—the ones who seemed to read the wave best, who found the speed pockets and wheeled their boards so neatly through their turns. My first impression was confirmed: I had never seen such smoothness. Hand movements were strikingly in synch with feet. Knees were more deeply bent than in the surfing I was used to, hips looser. There wasn't much nose-riding, which was the subspecialty rage at the time on the mainland and required scurrying, when the opportunity arose, to the front of one's board—hanging five, hanging ten, defying the obvious physics of flotation and glide. I didn't know it then, but what I was looking at was classic Island style. I just took my mental notes from the channel, and began, without thinking about it, to walk the nose less.

There were a few young guys, including one wiry, straight-backed kid who looked to be about my age. He stayed away from the main peak, riding peripheral waves. But I craned to see what he did. Even on the funky little waves he chose, I could see that he was shockingly quick and poised. He was

the best surfer my age I had ever seen. He rode an unusually short, light, sharp-nosed board—a bone-white clear-finish *Wardy*. He caught me watching him, and he seemed as embarrassed as I was. He paddled furiously past me, looking affronted. I tried to stay out of his way after that. But the next day he cocked his chin in greeting. I hoped my happiness didn't show. Then, a few days later, he spoke.

"Mo' bettah that side," he said, throwing his eyes to the west as we pushed through a small set. It was an invitation to join him at one of his obscure, uncrowded peaks. I didn't need to be asked twice.

His name was Roddy Kaulukukui. He was thirteen, same as me. "He's so tan he looks Negro," I wrote to my friend. Roddy and I traded waves warily, and then less warily. I could catch waves as well as he could, which was important, and I was learning the spot, which became something of a shared enterprise. As the two youngest guys at Cliffs, we were both, at least half-consciously, in the market for an age-mate. But Roddy didn't come out there alone. He had two brothers and a sort of honorary third brother—a Japanese guy named Ford Takara. Roddy's older brother, Glenn, was a lineup mainstay. Glenn and Ford were out every day. They were only a year older than us, but both of them could compete with anybody in the main peak. Glenn in particular was a superb surfer, with a style that was already flowing and beautiful. Their father, Glenn Sr., also surfed, as did their little brother, John, though he was too young for Cliffs.

Roddy began to fill me in on who some of the other guys were. The fat guy who appeared on bigger days, taking off far outside and ripping so hard that the rest of us stopped surfing to watch, was Ben Aipa, he said. (Years later, Aipa photos and stories began to fill the mags.) The Chinese guy who showed up on the biggest day I had seen yet at Cliffs—a solid, out-of-season south swell on a windless, overcast afternoon—was Leslie Wong. He had a silky style, and he only deigned to surf Cliffs when it was exceptionally good. Leslie Wong caught and pulled into the wave of the day, his back slightly arched, his arms relaxed, making the extremely difficult—no, come on, the *ecstatic*—look easy. When I grew up, I wanted to be Leslie Wong. Among the Cliffs regulars, I slowly got to know who was likely to waste a wave—fail to catch it, or fall off—and then how to quietly snag the wave myself without showing disrespect. Even in a mild-mannered crowd, it was important not to show up anyone.

Day in, day out, Glenn Kaulukukui was my favorite surfer. From the moment he caught a wave, gliding catlike to his feet, I couldn't take my eyes off the lines he drew, the speed he somehow found, the improvisations he came up with. He had a huge head, which seemed always to be slightly thrown back, and long hair, sun-bleached red, also thrown lushly back. He had thick lips, African-looking, black shoulders, and he moved with unusual elegance. But there was something else—call it wit, or irony—that accompanied his physical confidence and beauty, something bittersweet that allowed him in all but the most demanding situations, to seem like he was both performing intently and, at the same time, laughing quietly at himself.

He also laughed at me, though not unkindly. When I overpowered a kickout, trying to put a flourish on the end of a ride, slicing awkwardly over the shoulder and into parallel with his board in the channel, Glenn said, "Geev 'um, Bill. Geev 'um da lights." Even I knew that this was a pidgin cliché—an overused exhortation. It was also a dense little piece of satire. He was mocking me and encouraging me, both. We paddled out together. When we were nearly outside, we watched Ford catch a set wave from a deep position and pick a clever line to thread through a pair of difficult sections. "Yeah, Fawd," Glenn murmured appreciatively. "Spock *dat*." Then he began to outsprint me toward the lineup.

One afternoon Roddy asked where I lived. I pointed east, toward the shady cove inside Black Point. He told Glenn and Ford, then came back, looking abashed, with a request. Could they leave their boards at my house? I was happy for the company on the long paddle home. Our cottage had a tiny yard, with a stand of bamboo, thick and tall, hiding it from the street. We stashed our boards in the



bamboo and washed off in the dark with a garden hose. Then the three of them left, wearing nothing but trunks, dripping wet, clearly stoked to be unburdened by boards, for distant Kaimuki.

• • •

THE IN CROWD'S RACISM was situationist, not doctrinaire. It seemed to have no historical pretensions—unlike, say, the skinheads who came along later claiming descent from Nazism and the Klan. Hawaii had seen plenty of white supremacism, particularly among its elites, but the In Crowd knew nothing of elites. Most of the kids were hardscrabble, living in straitened circumstances, though some had been kicked out of private schools and were simply in disgrace. Among Kaimuki Intermediate's smattering of haole students, most were actually shunned by the In Crowd as insufficiently cool. These unaffiliated haoles seemed to be mainly military kids. They all looked disoriented, scared. The two guys who had watched me fight the Freitases without offering help were among them. And so was a tremendously tall, silent, friendless boy whom people called Lurch.

There were other haoles, I later realized, who were too smart to get involved in gang nonsense. These kids, most of them surfers from the Waikiki side of Diamond Head, knew how to keep low profiles when in the minority. They also knew losers when they saw them. And they had, in a pinch, their own mutual-assistance structures to draw on. But I was too clueless those first months to register their existence.

Adolescent cool was, as ever, mostly a mystery, but physical strength (read: early puberty), self-confidence (special bonus points for defying adults), and taste in music and clothes all counted. I couldn't see how I qualified in any category. I wasn't big—indeed, puberty seemed, to my shame, to be eluding me. I wasn't hip to fashion or music. I certainly wasn't bad—I had never even been to jail. But I admired the spunk of the In Crowd kids, and I wasn't inclined to question anybody who had my back.

I thought the In Crowd's main activity would be gang fighting, and there was certainly continual talk of impending warfare with various rival "moke" groups. But then Mike always seemed to be leading a peace delegation to some last-minute powwow, and bloodshed would be avoided through painstaking, face-saving diplomacy. Truces would be formalized by solemn underage drinking. Most of the group's energy actually went into gossip, parties, petty theft and vandalism, and being obnoxious on the city bus after school. There were a number of pretty girls in the In Crowd, and I was serially smitten with each of them. Nobody in the gang surfed.

• • •

RODDY AND GLENN KAULUKUKUI and Ford Takara all went to Kaimuki Intermediate, it turned out. But I didn't hang with them there. That was a feat, since the four of us spent nearly every afternoon and weekend together in the water, and Roddy was soon established as my new best friend. The Kaulukukuis lived at Fort Ruger, on the north slope of Diamond Head crater, near the cemetery that abutted our school. Glenn Sr. was in the Army, and their apartment was in an old military barracks tucked in a little kiawe grove below Diamond Head Road. Roddy and Glenn had lived on the island of Hawaii, which everybody called the Big Island. They had family there. Now they had a stepmother, and she and Roddy didn't get along. She was Korean. Did I know what Koreans were like? Roddy was ready to fill me in.

Confined to quarters after a fight with his stepmother, he poured out his misery in bitter whispers in the stifling room he shared with Glenn and John.

I thought I knew something about misery: I was missing waves that afternoon in a show of

solidarity. There wasn't even a surf mag to leaf through while grimacing sympathetically. "Why he have to marry *her*?" Roddy keened.

Glenn Sr. occasionally came surfing with us. He was a formidable character, heavily muscled, severe. He ordered his sons around, not bothering with niceties. He seemed to loosen up in the water, though. Sometimes he even laughed. He rode a huge board in a simple, old-fashioned style, drawing long lines, perfectly balanced, across the long walls at Cliffs. In his day, his sons told me proudly, he had surfed Waimea Bay.

Waimea was on the North Shore. It was considered the heaviest big-wave spot in the world. I knew it only as a mythical place—a stage set, really, for the heroics of a few surf celebrities, hyped endlessly in the mags. Roddy and Glenn didn't talk much about it, but to them Waimea was obviously a real place, and exceedingly serious business. You surfed it when you were ready. Most surfers, of course, would never be ready. But for Hawaiian kids like them, Waimea, and the other great North Shore breaks as well, lay ahead, each a question, a type of final exam.

I had always assumed that only famous surfers rode Waimea. But now I saw that local fathers rode it too, and in time, perhaps, their sons would as well. These people never appeared in mainland magazines. And there were many families like the Kaulukukuis in Hawaii—multigenerational surfing families, *ohanas* rich in talent and tradition, known only to one another.

Glenn Sr. reminded me, from the first time I saw him, of Liloa, the old monarch in a book I loved, *Umi: The Hawaiian Boy Who Became a King*. It was a children's book, first given to my father, according to a faded flyleaf inscription, by two aunts who had bought it in Honolulu in 1939. The author, Robert Lee Eskridge, had also done the illustrations, which I thought magnificent. They were simple but fierce, like lushly colored woodcuts. They showed Umi and his younger brothers and their adventures in old Hawaii: sailing down mountainsides on morning-glory vines ("From vine to vine the boys slid with lightning speed"), diving into pools formed by lava tubes, crossing the sea in war canoes ("Slaves shall accompany Umi to his father's palace in Waipio"). Some of the illustrations showed grown men, guards and warriors and courtiers, whose faces scared me—their stylized cruelty in a pitiless world of all-powerful chiefs and quaking commoners. At least the features of Liloa, the king and Umi's secret father, were softened at times by wisdom and paternal pride.

Roddy believed in Pele. She was the Hawaiian goddess of fire. She lived, people said, on the Big Island, where she caused the volcanoes to erupt when she was displeased. She was famously jealous and violent, and Hawaiians tried to propitiate her with offerings of pork, fish, liquor. She was so famous that even tourists knew about her, but Roddy made it clear, when he professed his belief to me that he wasn't talking about the kitsch character. He meant a whole religious world, something from before the haoles came—a Hawaiian world with elaborate rules and taboos and secret, hard-won understandings about the land, the ocean, birds, fish, animals, and the gods. I took him seriously. I already knew, in rough outline, what had happened to the Hawaiians—how American missionaries and other haoles had subjugated them, stolen their lands, killed them en masse with diseases, and converted the survivors to Christianity. I felt no responsibility for this cruel dispossession, no liberal guilt, but I knew enough to keep my junior atheist's mouth shut.

We started surfing new spots together. Roddy wasn't afraid of coral the way I was, and he showed me spots that broke among the reefs between my house and Cliffs. Most were only rideable at high tide but some were little keyholes, slots between dry reef—sweet waves hiding in plain sight, essentially windproof. These breaks, Roddy said, were customarily named after the families who lived, or had once lived, in front of them—Patterson's, Mahoney's. There was also a big-wave spot, known as the Bomb, that broke outside Patterson's. Glenn and Ford had ridden it once or twice. Roddy had not. I had seen waves feathering (their crests throwing spray as the swells steepened) out there on big days at low tide, but had never seen it big enough to break. Roddy talked about the Bomb in a hushed,

strained voice. He was obviously working up to it.

“This summer,” he said. “First big day.”

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In the meantime, we had Kaikoos. It was a deepwater break off Black Point, visible from the bottom of our lane. It was hard to line up, and always bigger than it looked, and I found it scary. Roddy led me out there the first time, paddling through a deep, cross-chopped channel that had been cut originally, he told me, by Doris Duke, the tobacco heiress, to serve a private yacht harbor that was still tucked into the cliff under her mansion. He pointed toward the shore, but I was too worried about the waves ahead to check out Doris Duke’s place.

Thick, dark blue peaks seemed to jump up out of deep ocean, some of them frighteningly big. The lefts were short and easy, really just big drops, but Roddy said the rights were better, and he paddled farther east, deeper into the break. His temerity seemed to me insane. The rights looked closed out (unmakable), and terribly powerful, and even if you made one the ride would carry you straight into the big, hungry-looking rocks of outer Black Point. If you lost your board in there, you would never see it again. And where could you even swim in? I darted around, dodging peaks, way outside, half-hysterical, trying to keep an eye on Roddy. He seemed to be catching waves, though it was hard to tell. Finally, he paddled back to me, looking exhilarated, smirking at my agitation. He took pity on me, though, and said nothing.

I later learned to like—not love—the rights at Kaikoos. The spot was often empty, but there were a few guys who knew how to ride it, and, watching them on good days from the Black Point rocks, I began to see the shape of the reef and how to avoid, with a little luck, catastrophe. Still, it was a gnarly spot by my standards, and when I bragged in letters to my friend in Los Angeles about riding this scary, deepwater peak, I was not above spinning tall tales about being carried, with Roddy, by huge currents halfway to Koko Head, which was miles away to the east. My detailed description of scooting through a big tube—the cavern formed by a hard-breaking wave—on a Kaikoos right contained, on the other hand, a whiff of authenticity. I still half remember that wave.

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BUT SURFING ALWAYS HAD this horizon, this fear line, that made it different from other things, certainly from other sports I knew. You could do it with friends, but when the waves got big, or you got into trouble, there never seemed to be anyone around.

Everything out there was disturbingly interlaced with everything else. Waves were the playing field. They were the goal. They were the object of your deepest desire and adoration. At the same time, they were your adversary, your nemesis, even your mortal enemy. The surf was your refuge, your happy hiding place, but it was also a hostile wilderness—a dynamic, indifferent world. At thirteen, I had mostly stopped believing in God, but that was a new development, and it had left a hole in my world, a feeling that I’d been abandoned. The ocean was like an uncaring God, endlessly dangerous, power beyond measure.

And yet you were expected, even as a kid, to take its measure every day. You were required—this was essential, a matter of survival—to know your limits, both physical and emotional. But how could you know your limits unless you tested them? And if you failed the test? You were also required to stay calm if things went wrong. Panic was the first step, everybody said, to drowning. As a kid, too, your abilities were assumed to be growing. What was unthinkable one year became thinkable, possibly, the next. My letters from Honolulu in 1966, kindly returned to me recently, are less distinguished by swaggering bullshit than by frank discussions of fear. “Don’t think I’ve suddenly gotten brave. I haven’t.” But the frontiers of the thinkable were quietly, fitfully edging back for me.

That was clear on the first big day I saw at Cliffs. A long-period swell had arrived overnight. The

sets (larger waves, which usually come in groups) were well overhead, glassy and gray, with long walls and powerful sections. I was so excited to see the excellence that my backyard spot could produce that I forgot my usual shyness and began to ride with the crowd at the main peak. I was overmatched there, and scared, and got mauled by the biggest sets. I wasn't strong enough to hold on to my board when caught inside by six-foot waves, even though I "turned turtle"—rolled the board over, pulled the nose down from underwater, wrapped my legs around it, and got a death grip on the rails. The whitewater tore the board from my hands, then thrashed me, holding me down for long, thorough beatings. I spent much of the afternoon swimming. Still, I stayed out till dusk. I even caught and made a few meaty waves. And I saw surfing that day—by Leslie Wong, among others—that made my chest hurt: long moments of grace under pressure that felt etched deep in my being: what I wanted somehow, more than anything else. That night, while my family slept, I lay awake on the bamboo-framed couch, heart pounding with residual adrenaline, listening restlessly to the rain.

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OUR LIFE IN THE LITTLE COTTAGE on Kulamanu felt makeshift, barely American. There were geckos on the walls, cane rats under the floor, huge water bugs in the bathroom. There was strange fruit—mangoes, papayas, lychees, star fruit—that my mother learned to judge for ripeness, then proudly peel and slice. I don't remember if we even had a TV. The sitcoms that had been a kind of prime-time hearth back on the mainland—*My Three Sons*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, even my favorite, *Get Smart*—now seemed like half-remembered black-and-white dreams from a world left behind. We had a landlady, Mrs. Wadsworth, who watched us suspiciously. Still, I found renting grand. Mrs. Wadsworth had a gardener, which afforded me a life of leisure. My yard chores in California had seemed to take up half my waking hours.

Another thing about our exotic new life: we all squabbled less, maybe because we each remained slightly awestruck by our new surroundings. And the fights we did have never escalated into the full-dress screaming and belting and spanking that we had regularly endured in L.A. When my mother yelled, "Wait till your father gets home," she didn't seem serious now. It was as if she were slyly quoting an earlier self, or some TV mom, and even the little ones were in on the joke.

My father worked at least six days a week. When we had him with us, on the odd Sunday, we would ramble around the island—cross the sheer, dripping, wind-blasted Pali (the pass over the mountains that stood like a green wall above Honolulu), or picnic out at Hanauma Bay, beyond Koko Head, where the snorkeling on the reef was wondrous. He made it home most evenings, and on special occasions we went to a restaurant called the Jolly Roger, part of a pirate-themed chain, with burgers named after Robert Louis Stevenson characters, in a shopping mall in Kahala. One night we went to see Disney's *Snow White* at a drive-in on Waialae Avenue, all six of us in a pile in our old Ford Fairlane. I know this because I wrote to my friend in L.A. about it. I described the film as "psychedelic."

My father's Hawaii was a big, truly interesting place. He was regularly in the outer islands, herding film crews and talent into rain forests, remote villages, tricky shoots on unsteady canoes. He even shot a Pele number on a Big Island lava field. Although he didn't know it, he was building the foundation for an adjunct career as a Hawaii specialist—he spent most of the next decade making feature films and TV shows in the islands. His job involved constant battling with local labor unions, particularly the teamsters and the longshoremen, who controlled freight transportation. There was abundant private irony in these battles, since my father was a strong union man, from a union family (railroaders) in Michigan. Indeed, family legend had it that in New York City, where I was born, he spent the night of my birth in a jail cell, having been plucked off a picket line outside the CBS studio

where he worked as a newswriter, and where he and his friends were trying to organize. Though he never talked about it, our move to California, with me still an infant, had been driven by employment difficulties caused by his labor militancy. It was the heyday of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The Hawaiian unions were, around that same time, performing postwar miracles. Led by an outpouring of the West Coast longshoremen, in league with local Japanese American leftists, they even organized plantation workers, transforming a feudal economy. This was in a territory where, before the war, the harassment and even murder of strikers and organizers by management goons and police generally went unpunished. By the mid-'60s, however, Hawaii's labor movement, like much of its mainland counterpart, had grown complacent, top-heavy, and corrupt, and my father, although he came to like personally some of the union bosses he fought daily, never seemed much edified by the struggle.

His work carried us into odd orbits. A hyperkinetic restaurateur named Chester Lau, for instance, had attached himself to *Hawaii Calls*, and for years my family turned up at far-flung luaus and pig roasts and civic events organized by Chester and usually held at one of his joints.

My dad gained enough sense of local working-class culture to know that the streets of Honolulu (and perhaps the schools) might be a challenge for a haole kid. If nothing else, there was a notorious unofficial holiday called Kill a Haole Day. This holiday got plenty of discussion, including editorials (against) in the local papers, though I never managed to find out where precisely on the calendar it fell. "Any day the mokes want," said Mike, our In Crowd chief. I also never heard whether the holiday occasioned any actual homicides. The main targets, people said, of Kill a Haole Day were actually off-duty servicemen, who generally wandered in packs around Waikiki and the red-light district downtown. I think my father took comfort in seeing that my best friends were the local kids who kept their surfboards in our yard. They looked like they could handle themselves.

He had always worried about bullies. When confronted by bigger boys, or outnumbered, I should, he told me, "pick up a stick, a rock, whatever you can find." He got alarmingly emotional giving me this advice. Was he remembering ancient beatings and humiliations in Escanaba, his Michigan hometown? Or was it just so upsetting, the thought of his child, his Billy, alone and set upon by thugs I had never taken the advice, in any case. There had been plenty of fighting, some of it involving sticks and rocks, in Woodland Hills, the California suburb where we lived, but rarely the stark encounter my dad envisioned. Once, it was true, a Mexican kid, a stranger, got me down under some pepper trees after school, pinning my arms, and squeezed lemon juice into my eyes. That might have been a good time to grab a stick. But I couldn't quite believe that was happening. Lemon juice? In my eyes? Put there by someone I didn't even know? My eyes burned for days. I never told my parents about the incident. That would have been a violation of the Code of Boys. Neither did I tell them (or anyone else) about Freitas and his terrible two-by-four.

My father as a scared child—that was a picture that would not come into focus. He was Dad, Big Bill Finnegan, strong as a grizzly. His biceps, a marvel to all of us, were like marbled oak burls. I would never have such arms. I had inherited my mother's string-bean build. My dad seemed scared of no one. Indeed, he had a cantankerous streak that could be mortifying. He wasn't afraid to raise his voice in public. He sometimes asked the proprietors of shops and restaurants that posted signs asserting their right to refuse service to anyone what exactly *that* meant, and if he didn't like their answers angrily took his business elsewhere. This didn't happen in Hawaii, but it happened plenty of times on the mainland. I didn't know that such notices were often code for "whites only"—these were the waning days of legal racial segregation. I just quailed and stared desperately at the ground, dying of embarrassment as his voice began to rise.

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MY MOTHER WAS PAT, née Quinn. Her willowy figure was misleading. With a mostly absent husband and no domestic help, she raised four kids without seeming to break a sweat. She had grown up in a Los Angeles that no longer exists—white Catholic working-class Roosevelt liberals—and her generation, reaching adulthood after the war, was broadly, blithely upwardly mobile. Beachgoing progressives, they hitched their stars, for the most part, to the entertainment industry—husbands working in it, wives managing the suburban brood. My mother had an easygoing, tennis-playing grace. She also knew how to make ends meet. When I was little, I thought carrot, apple, and raisin salad was required fare, seven nights a week. In fact, those were the cheapest healthy foods in California at the time. My mother's people were Irish-immigrant hill farmers in West Virginia and she, even more than my dad, was a child of the Depression. Her father, an alcoholic refrigerator repairman, had died young. She never mentioned him. Her mother, left to raise three girls alone, had gone back to school and become a nurse. When my grandmother first saw my father, who was an inch shorter than my mother, she reportedly sighed and said, "Well, all the tall ones got killed in the war."

My mother was endlessly game. She didn't like sailing but spent most weekends knocking around on the succession of little boats that my father, as we got less broke, bought and doted on. She didn't like camping but went camping without complaint. She didn't even like Hawaii, although I didn't know that at the time. To her, the provincialism of Honolulu was suffocating. She had grown up in L.A., had lived in New York, and apparently found the Honolulu daily paper painful to read. She was terrifically social, and not at all snobbish, but she made few friends in Hawaii. My father had never really cared much about friends—if he wasn't working, he preferred to be with his family—but my mother missed the wide circle of other families we knew in L.A., most of them also in show business as well as her close friends from childhood.



Patricia Finnegan, Windward Side, Oahu, 1966

She hid all of that from us and threw herself into making the most of life in an insular, reactionary town. She loved the water, which was lucky (though not for her fair Irish skin). On the patch of damp sand at the bottom of our path, she would spread beach towels and lead the little ones into the lagoon with masks and nets. She got my sister, Colleen, into training for her First Communion at a church in Waikiki. She even, when possible, jumped on planes to the neighboring islands with my dad, usually with Michael, who was three, on her hip, and some hasty babysitting arrangement in her wake. And in the outer islands she found, I think, a Hawaii more to her liking—not the Babbitty boosters and country-club racists of Honolulu. In snapshots from those jaunts, she looked like a stranger: not Mona but some pensive, stylish lady in a sleeveless turquoise shift, alone with her thoughts in the middle distance—a Joan Didion character, it seems now, walking barefoot, sandals in hand, past a shaggy wall of shorefront pines. Didion, I later learned, was her favorite writer.

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I TREASURED THE BREAK from yard work. But, to my sorrow, I was coming into my own as a babysitter. My parents, ignorant of my budding career as a Kaimuki gangbanger, knew me only as Mr. Responsible. That had been my role at home since shortly after the others started arriving. There was a substantial age gap between me and my siblings—Kevin was more than four years younger, Michael ten—and I could be counted on to keep the little ones undrowned, unelectrocuted, fed, watered, rediapered. But formal babysitting duties, evenings and weekends, were a new thing, and a terrible imposition, I found, when there were waves to ride, city buses begging to be pelted with unripe

mangoes, unchaperoned parties to attend in Kaimuki. I took my revenge on poor Kevin and Colleen by sourly reminiscing about the good old days before they were born. It was a golden age, really. Just Mom and Dad and me, doing what we pleased. Every night out at the Jolly Roger. Cheeseburgers, chocolate malts. No crying babies. Those were the days.

I tried to lose my job one blazing Saturday with Colleen. She was scheduled to receive First Communion the next day. Saturday was dress rehearsal for the big ceremony. Mom and Dad were away, probably at a Chester Lau function. Colleen was in head-to-toe white lace regalia. She was supposed to make her First Confession that day—although what, even generally, a seven-year-old girl would have to confess in the way of mortal sins is hard to imagine. The Saturday rehearsal was, in any case, mandatory. The Roman Catholics in those days did not fool around. If you missed the rehearsal you would not make your First Communion. Come back next year, little sinner, and God save your soul in the interim. Because I had been raised in the cold bosom of the church, I knew what tough nuts the nuns could be. Therefore, when Colleen and I contrived to miss the once-an-hour city bus to Waikiki on the day of her rehearsal, I knew exactly what the stakes were. And because I was still, deep down, little Mr. Responsible, I panicked. I put my tiny sister out in the middle of Diamond Head Road in her showstopping costume, flagged down the first Waikiki-bound vehicle, and got her to the church on time.

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I WAS STARTING TO GET my bearings in Honolulu. From the lineup at Cliffs, you could see the whole south coast of Oahu, from the Waianae Mountains in the west, beyond Honolulu and Pearl Harbor, to Koko Head, which was a sort of second-rank Diamond Head—another parched-looking crater at the water's edge—in the east. The city filled a plain between the coast and the Ko'olau Range, whose steep green peaks were usually buried in clouds and mist under brilliant, billowing thunderheads. The mountains sent rain clouds out to water the city, though most burned up before they reached the coast. Rainbows littered the sky. Beyond the mountains was the Windward Side, and somewhere out that way was the fabled North Shore.

Directions in Honolulu were always given, though, in terms of local landmarks, not the compass, so you went mauka (toward the mountains) or makai (toward the sea) or ewa (toward Ewa Beach, which was out past the airport and Pearl Harbor) or diamondhead. (Among those of us living on the far side of Diamond Head, people just said kokohead—same difference.) These picturesque directions weren't slang or affectations—you saw them on official maps and street signs. And they were also, for me—and my sense of this was unformed but strong—a salient piece of a world more unitary, for all its fractiousness, a world more coherent in its mid-Pacific isolation than any I'd known before. I missed my friends in L.A. But Southern California, in its sprawling, edgeless blandness, was losing its baseline status in my mind. It was no longer the place by which all other places had to be measured. There was a kid in the In Crowd, Steve, who grouched endlessly about “the Rock.” He meant Oahu, although he made it sound like Alcatraz. Steve's urgent ambition was to escape the Rock, ideally to England, where his favorite band, the Kinks, played. But anywhere “mainland”—anywhere not Hawaii—would do. I, meanwhile, wouldn't have minded staying in Da Islands forever.

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IN OLD HAWAII, before the arrival of Europeans, surfing had religious import. After prayers and offerings, master craftsmen made boards from sacred koa or wiliwili trees. Priests blessed swells, lashed the water with vines to raise swells, and some breaks had *heiaus* (temples) on the beach where



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