

GAFF*

* A sharp piercing or cutting instrument fastened to the leg of a gamecock in cockfighting.

GAFF

SHAN CORREA



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ONE

Only five kids—no, six—have ever slept over at my house: Brian Harada, Kia Simpson, Junior Reeves, Damien Kekau, my second cousin Marty Silva who moved to the mainland last year, and Angel “Sal” Salvador. And only one kid slept over more than once.

We’ve called Angel “Sal” for as long as I can remember because “Angel” didn’t sound like a real name to us. Maybe because none of the rest of us were Filipino. Besides, “Angel” didn’t fit him very well. Anyway, Sal Salvador’s the only kid who ever spent more than one night at my house.

You think maybe my house is old or smelly or haunted or something? No way! It’s nice—pretty big, and not too messy. And I’m lucky because I have my own room and it’s in back where it’s cool.

But my friends won’t stay here at night on account of the birds and all the racket they make, especially really early in the morning. Rooster #43 starts them out with the crowing. I know: I got up at three in the morning last week to find out who started all the commotion. I know a lot of the birds, and #43 is this squawky, smallish year-old guy with a long neck.

SHAN CORREA

Good for crowing. So I wasn't totally surprised when, about three-fifteen, he let out with a crow that about knocked me on my *okole!*

He woke up every chicken in his neighborhood and they crowed until the sun came up at six, when normal roosters are supposed to say it's time to wake up. I'd gone back to bed way before then. Went right back to sleep, even with all the racket going on. I couldn't do that when we first got the roosters, but now it's easy.

Kids who don't raise roosters never sleep over more than one time, though. Junior Reeves lives on a farm farther up the mountain and has tons of animals, but even he said that one night here was enough.

Junior's only lived in Hawaii a couple of years, but he's already picked up lots of the things we do here in Hawaii. If you'd seen him even a week after he got here, he'd flash you a *shaka* sign. And now he speaks perfect Hawaiian pidgin. My parents don't like me to speak pidgin because they say it will limit me in school and in real life. So most of the time, I speak pretty good English. Standard English, they call it in school. Then I can switch when I'm with my friends who talk pidgin, so it works out fine.

Anyway, when the roosters woke Junior up that time, he said something like, "Neva again, Paulie! Neva, eva aks me stay at you house. *Noisy*, da buggas! Sound like sireens all night. Like banshees, da cheekins. Sheesh! Gotta be *pupule* to sleep tru all dat."

Not true. Sal sleeps in the other twin bed in my room just fine, and he's not crazy. But then, he grew up with roosters.

GAFF

His family raised them for years before my dad started. Ours are on three acres in front of our house, so they're not close to my bedroom, but Sal's dad lets the birds stay just any old place they want. They sleep under the car in the carport sometimes, and once they chased a poor mongoose right into Mrs. Salvador's kitchen. My dad always says that Mr. Salvador's a good breeder, but not much competition. He never has more than forty gamecocks at a time, and he's not very organized.

We have over two hundred, which tells you why there's so much noise. Two hundred big, loudmouth birds all screeching at once sometimes. Well, I guess you just have to get used to it. And it's worse when I stay over at Sal's. You'll be sound asleep, and a loose bird will hop up on his window frame and "Er-uh-Er-uh-Errr!" And even Sal and me just about fall out of bed, they scare us so much—or at least we fall off his mattress, which is on the floor, so really we wouldn't get very hurt if we did fall out. But what Junior said in his best pidgin was true. The roosters are super noisy little buggas!

But roosters are what we do, how we earn our living. Dad breeds and raises strong, healthy birds, then he sells them for hundreds—sometimes even thousands—of dollars when they're about two years old. And even if most of my friends won't sleep over here, that's okay. I love these noisy guys.

That's probably why I invited Honey Kealoha up to my house this morning. She'd never been here before, and of course she'd never slept over because she was a girl. So I really wanted to just show her around. Show off our birds.

But the first thing she said when we stood on our front

lanai and looked out over the rows of my dad's roosters was, "This reminds me of death."

She said it real quiet, but I wouldn't have been more surprised if she'd screamed it in my ear. I looked down at her hands, holding onto the wooden railing. They held on tight, like she thought she might fall down onto our front grass.

"Death?" I said. "Something here reminds you of death?"

"It's just a feeling, Paul." She swung her arm around and pointed from one side of our lawn to the other. "What do you see here?"

"Our grass, I guess. Our lawn here by the lanai. Then our beautiful roosters, all of them in the shade now. Every bird in his own little A-frame cottage so the sun doesn't cook him when it's hot like this. My mom's little garden over there."

Honey nodded. "Yeah. That's what I see, too."

"Then...*death*?"

"I know that's weird. Maybe it reminds me of a cemetery. All the rows nice and neat, with grass between them like at Punchbowl, the cemetery that's up above Honolulu. Did you ever go there?"

I didn't want to tell her that I'd only been off our island once in my life, and that was to Kauai, not Oahu. So I just said, "No. But I've seen it on the reruns of *Hawaii 5-0*. You know those pictures at the beginning? Dad said they took them at Punchbowl Crater. That's where my Grampa Landers is. He died in Vietnam when my mom was little."

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay. If you have to be in a cemetery, Punchbowl is a pretty good place to be, I guess."

GAFF

“Well, it looks kind of like this when you’re there inside the crater. With long, neat rows of grave markers. One for every grave. Every soldier. Maybe that’s why I get this sad feeling here.”

“Yeah.”

“Or I’m sad when I see the roosters. Knowing that someday—”

“Hey! Don’t feel sorry for these birds. They have the best life ever, you know! Dad and Uncle Porky treat these birds with *respect*. Everybody says we have the best birds on the island. You should see what we feed them. Nothing but the best. The best food we can buy.” I pointed to the low white building on our right. “See that? That’s the infirmary. A little hospital, just for the chickens. Anybody gets sick, my uncle takes care of them right there. He takes care of them like, like...”

“Treasures?”

“Sure. These guys closest to the house will be sold pretty soon. Uncle Porky has trained them at his place and they’re ready for the buyers now. This is how Dad supports Mom and Emily and me since he got hurt at the lumberyard almost two years ago.”

“That was so terrible.” She shut her eyes for a second.

“Yeah. I don’t even like to think about it. Don’t worry, though. He’s a lot better now.”

“Oh. Good.” She looked around like she was thinking about something else. “What happens if a bird is, you know...injured?”

“Infirmary. My Uncle Porky’s the best chicken doctor in Hawaii.”

I had Honey follow me down the steps then, and did what I'd planned to do for about a hundred years: showed her around. Showed her our birds, their beautiful feathers and wide wings. Honey said they had clear, wise-looking eyes, and I told her not to get too close. They can really peck, you know.

Honey pointed at some of the older birds. "Those roosters over there don't have any combs and...what are those reddish, wobbly things under their chins called?"

"Wattles," I said. "They were dubbed—trimmed off—a few months ago because they aren't necessary. Don't worry. Uncle Porky does it so it doesn't hurt them."

We ducked into the infirmary. "Wow," Honey said. "It even smells like a hospital in here."

"Yeah. The disinfectant. Everything spic and span, my mom says. Everything clean and nice."

Nobody was inside—no Uncle Porky or Dad. No birds recovering from injuries. I was kinda happy about that. Seeing a hurt bird might make Honey want to leave. She's a girl, after all, and maybe she isn't as brave as I thought she was. But she didn't seem so sad now. I think she was beginning to get impressed.

When I showed her the incubators with the baby chicks, she smiled and watched them wiggle around. Some had just hatched and were super ugly. She didn't even care.

Next, we went out of the infirmary to see where our brood hens lived in a small chicken house. They had a big fenced-off yard where they were pecking and clucking around.

Honey laughed when she spotted a fat Miner Blue hen in

GAFF

the yard. “It looks like that girl’s taking a bath in the dirt and dust!”

“That’s just what she’s doing. Looks fun?”

“Not really. Guess I’ve never seen anyone take a bath so they can get dirty. About how many hens are here?”

“Never more than twenty. They’re special types, used mostly for breeding, not for eggs. We do have eggs for breakfast, though. We can give you some if you want.”

After our tour, I took Honey up the hill to the back of the house. It’s shady there, with a little lawn and a grove of bamboo and octopus trees and woodrose vines back behind. Ferns and *ohia* trees hang onto the lava rock behind that.

“We have a better view from the front lanai,” I said, “but it’s okay back here.”

“I like it here.” She wiped some woodrose leaves off the old green picnic table bench and slid in, facing the ferns and the trees. While she couldn’t see me, I tried to push my awful hair down because I knew it was all wild. Then I sat down on the same bench, but way over to the other end. My crazy cat Milo jumped up on the bench, too, right beside Honey. He curled up and let her pet him, just like she lived here or something.

“So this is Milo,” Honey said, bending over him and rubbing the back of his ears.

“Yeah. I forgot you never met him.”

“No, but you talk about him so much, I feel like I know him. Hey, Milo. You’re a beautiful cat, aren’t you?” She petted him some more and he closed his eyes. “I see why you named him that,” she said to me. “He’s exactly the color of *milo* wood.”

“That’s why I decided on the name. Some people say it wrong, though, if they’re not from here. I wrote his name, ‘Milo,’ on the vet’s papers when we got him and the lady who worked there said his name My-low instead of Mee-low. I had to tell her about the wood.”

Honey smiled. “He’s really pretty, Paul. He’s always friendly like this?”

“He usually doesn’t like people very much. Me, maybe, because I feed him. But most of the time, he’s not sure if he even likes *me*. I don’t think he’s gone near a girl since Emily dressed him up in her doll’s muumuu and carted him around in her doll stroller. I’m kinda surprised he’s doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Purring. Going to sleep snuggled up there.”

She giggled when Milo came out with this super loud purr. “I really like it out here, in back of your house.”

“Oh, yeah. Right. It’s okay here. Cooler. But in front, you can see the roosters, then clear down to the ocean if it isn’t foggy or raining. If you have good eyes like me, you can see container ships and those big cruise ships, even. You could probably see a tsunami coming, but we’re up too high to get flooded. Your house is out of the tidal wave zone, too, right?”

“Uh-huh. But not as high up in the hills as you guys.”

“Yeah. We like it here. My mom and dad bought it about a month before my dad got hurt. We have over three acres.”

I stopped myself from bragging any more and said, “Be back in a second.” I scooted off the bench and went in the back door to the kitchen. I’d checked the fridge before

GAFF

Honey came so I knew we had two Pepsis in there. I grabbed them and took some of those big Hilo Saloon Pilots crackers out in back. We ate them and talked, mostly about old friends and stuff. We were laughing about Mr. Matayoshi, our second-grade teacher, when we heard a couple of honks.

“That’s Dad,” Honey said. “He’s picking me up and we’re going fishing. I’ll take him a cracker if it’s okay.”

“Oh. Sure.” We both got up and headed around to Mr. Kealoha’s big Ford pickup. The door was open, and Honey climbed aboard. “*Mahalo*, Paul,” she said politely from the rolled-down window.

“Sure. You’re welcome.”

“It was really interesting coming here today. It was nice.”

I waved to her, watched the truck back down the drive, and then she was gone. After standing there for a minute, I went back to the picnic table, where there was no Honey and no Milo. I finished up my Saloon Pilots, chewing them real slow and wondering why Honey said that coming over was “interesting,” and not “awesome.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised, I guess. I shouldn’t have been surprised about anything that had to do with Honey Kealoha. I’d known her since small-kid-time, and she always said whatever she felt. We were both in Mrs. Lau’s kindergarten class, and even though we hadn’t been in the same class since second grade, we’re both in Mrs. Chong’s seventh grade class now and we’re kinda catching up with each other again.

Hardly anybody knows Honey’s real name is Malia. Even the teachers call her Honey. She was Honey in kindergarten even. And she was cute. She had honey-colored skin, like

SHAN CORREA

now, and long, black, shiny hair with a *pua* clipped behind her ear. Every day a different *pua*. A red hibiscus from the Kealohas' hedge, or maybe a peach-colored flower from their huge old plumeria tree.

I don't remember a lot about kindergarten because it was so long ago, but I do remember that Honey was there. Sometimes my mom let her mom pick us up after school, and Honey and me would climb the plumeria tree or their tall mango tree. But that was just when the mangos weren't blooming, because I'm allergic, and even when I was five I already had huge sneezing fits when the mangos were flowering.

Even then Honey was always honest, and that could be a real pain. I should've known she might be bothered about seeing our fighting roosters.

* * *

I was rinsing off the cracker plate in the kitchen when the phone by the sink rang. I almost dropped the dish—I always jump when that stupid phone rings. It's an old-fashioned wall phone and you can't make the ringer any quieter. I grabbed it with my wet hands before it could ring again.

"Howzit?" the voice said.

"I knew it was you, Sal."

Sal and I have this thing. We almost always know when we're thinking about each other. Maybe that's because we've been best friends forever. But I was still surprised when he asked me if Honey just left my house.

"How'd you know?"

GAFF

“I saw her dad’s blue truck go by from your direction and took a wild guess. What, you think I’m psychic or something?”

“Yeah, she was here. I showed her around.” I wondered for a second if I should say more. “She acted kind of weird when she was here.”

“Like how?”

“I don’t think she liked the roosters.”

“She’s a girl, Paulie. What did you expect?”

“Well. I sure didn’t think she’d look around and be thinking about *death*.”

“Death?”

“Death. Cemeteries. What happens to the birds who get hurt in the cockfights. That kinda thing.”

I thought Sal might laugh, but when he finally talked again, he was serious.

“Paulie,” he said, “you’re smart, but you always miss the easy stuff. The obvious stuff. Honey’s mom died this year. Of course that’s on her mind. This probably had nothing to do with you or the roosters.”

I thought for a second. Then I realized he was right. Why was I so dense? With anybody else, I’d have understood right away, but Honey sometimes makes me block out all my common sense. Just because she never talks about losing her mom doesn’t mean she doesn’t think about her all the time.

I remember how bad I felt when my dad’s aunt, my Great-auntie Sylvana, died last year. She was like a grandmother to me, always spoiling me and my sister. Making quilts for us, knitting sweaters. She showed my mom how to make this

great Portuguese sweet bread, and every time we have it I miss her. I can't even imagine what it would be like to have my own mom or dad die.

Mrs. Kealoha was a great mom, and Honey really loved her. Honey's strong, though. And brave, for a girl. So she probably just didn't want me to know what she was feeling this time.

"Paulie?" Sal asked. "You still there?"

"Oh. Yeah. Just thinking. You're probably right about Honey's mom and all. So...you coming over?"

"Nah. I don't think so. Wanna come over here? We should get started on the science thing."

"Is anybody at home?"

Again, Sal knew exactly what I was thinking. "By anybody, you mean my brother?"

"Yeah. I guess...Raymond's home?"

"He took off in his van for Waiele right after I got up this morning. He won't be back until tomorrow night. And Mom and Dad are down at St. Ann's for something all day, them and Eggie Fernandez's mom and dad. A church planning retreat or something like that. So come on over. The coast is clear."

"Okay. In a little while."

"See ya...and Paulie? Roosters are a man's thing, that's all. At least in my family. My mom won't have anything to do with um. Just ignore Honey. So. Later."

TWO

I did a few things—got rid of the spam from my e-mail, checked on the birds, took off my good aloha shirt and put on my “Get Poi?” T-shirt—before I took the two-minute walk over to Sal’s. We’re both at the end of our road, and the Salvadors are only one house over, but we can’t just yell across at each other or anything. His house is a little ways over on the other side of the trees and we both have these really long driveways. Sal and me talk about clearing a path between our houses, but it’s too jungley—too thick with trees and plants. We’d also have to build a bridge over the stream there.

At Sal’s, I pretty much forgot about the whole Honey thing because we had work to do. We were partners for the science fair project and we needed to come up with some ideas. Which we finally did. Mrs. Chong had told us to choose something we knew about. “That’ll give you a head start,” she said.

The one thing Sal and I knew a *lot* about was the birds. We decided to do an experiment about culling roosters, which is what our dads do to breed stronger, better birds. They keep and breed only the best of the birds that hatch.

We got the general idea down in Sal's computer. The whole thing took almost an hour, and because we'd been thinking and working so hard, we decided to reward ourselves with something more fun. We hiked along the stream to the big pond that's uphill from our houses.

It had gotten even hotter. The trade winds had died down to where we were pretty sweaty by the time we crawled over the rocks and waded into the pool.

"Oh, man!" I screamed. "This isn't water. It's ice!"

"Yeah! It feels *so* great!"

Sal was already up to his neck in the clear water, and he dog-paddled across the pool. We splashed and dive-bombed each other just like little kids.

"Lucky we live Hawaii, uh?" I said when we stretched out on a giant blue Bank of Hawaii beach towel and let the sun dry us off.

Sal said, "You got it. Lucky we live Hawaii! Ummm." And he yawned and I yawned, and I knew that for a while at least, I had no worries. About Honey, about science class, nothing. Everything was warm and peaceful, except for one crazy Brazilian cardinal who every now and then let out with this long, really complicated song. I don't think he was talking to anybody, just singing away for the heck of it, and I liked his song.

* * *

I think I was dreaming about being at the pool in the middle of the night when I heard somebody say "Paul!" It was my dad's voice, close to the bed, and I was wide-awake by the time he called me again.

GAFF

“Paul. Come with me.” He turned on my bedroom light before he went out the door. I scrambled out of bed and pulled on my pants and followed him as quick as I could. When his voice sounds like that, I don’t ask questions. I know something’s wrong. Something big.

Dad can’t walk too fast since the accident at Nakasone’s Lumberyard where he used to work. He was in a wheelchair for weeks after a load of lumber shifted and fell on him and crushed his right foot and hurt his back. For a while he had to use a walker, but now, almost two years later, he just needs a cane. I caught up with him before he’d gotten down the front steps.

He had his rifle in his right hand and he handed it to me while we walked. I took it, but my stomach started to feel scared.

Dad didn’t turn on the lights outside, but the moon was really bright. I could hear the roosters over in the farthest part of the yard. They weren’t crowing, but there were noises. A lot of commotion.

Even before I saw it, I guessed.

“A pig?” I whispered, and saw Dad nod as he walked ahead.

That was bad. But good, too—we weren’t going out in the dark looking for a person, at least. Somebody poaching our birds.

But then I saw it. A huge black shape. A wild boar, snuffling and rummaging around while the roosters panicked and squawked. The birds couldn’t get away because they were tethered to stakes. All they could do was screech and run around in circles.

I started running toward the boar. I passed Dad, and before he caught up with me, I saw the pig close in front of me. It was gigantic! Bigger than any I'd seen, even the dead ones Uncle Porky brought back from hunting. But this guy was alive! He smelled terrible, and I couldn't believe he was that close to me. What if he charged? His huge tusks could toss me around like one of Emily's dolls.

I cocked the rifle. "Should I try to shoot it?" I asked Dad, my voice all shaky. My arm was all shaky, too.

Dad didn't hear me because of the roosters' squawking and boar's snuffling, or else he just didn't answer, but by then there wasn't any need for shooting because the boar took off, letting out a crazy squeal. His legs looked little, but boy, could he move! By the time Dad said no, don't shoot, the guy was clear back in the trees again. Over the rooster noise, I could hear him shattering branches and stomping down tree ferns.

"Wow!" I said. "That guy was *gigantic!* Do you think he killed any of our birds?"

"No more than you killed *him*, I guess," Dad said. I could tell by his voice that he was smiling even though he was in front of me then, checking out the roosters and calming them down. I uncocked the rifle and put it down so I could help him. Finally everybody was okay, and we waited to see if the pig would come back.

"What are we going to do, Dad?" I asked.

"Well, we have to keep him from returning, that's the main thing. We've been lucky so far, but it's time we build a fence. Hate to do it, but we're going to need to stretch two or three lengths of barbed wire all around the birds."

GAFF

“Mom won’t like that. It won’t look nice by her garden.”

“Has to be done. She’ll understand. It may be just a temporary thing, anyway.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that. Maybe that we’d make a more permanent fence later? A chain-link fence, maybe. That would be stronger.

“I’ll help when I’m not at school.” Then I said, in a quieter voice, “I don’t know if I could’ve shot him, Dad.”

Dad didn’t say anything for a while. When he finally answered, his voice sounded tired, and old. “I don’t know if I could have, either, Paul. My folks raised me to take care of God’s creatures. Not to hurt them. Not to kill them.”

“Even the giant, black, ugly ones with tusks two feet long?”

“Well...I’m not absolutely sure about that.” He put his arm over my shoulder, and he probably could tell I was still shaking a little. Which was crazy. The pig was gone. The birds and my dad and I were safe.

“I don’t think he’s coming back tonight,” Dad said. “We can go back to bed.”

When I’d crawled back under my green and white Hawaiian quilt that Auntie Sylvana made me, I could hear Dad and Mom talking in low voices so they wouldn’t wake up Emily. I could hardly wait to tell my sister about the pig in the morning. She’d really be impressed! And Sal would want to hear every detail of the story. Tomorrow I’d enjoy the whole thing.