

Salvage

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Diana had come to Kauai to see a bird that would soon be extinct.

She stood alone at the fenced-in platform at the end of Kokee Road. Half a century ago, engineers had hoped to pave a road all the way around the edge of Kauai, but in this place they had been forced to stop, by weather or the ancient gods. Looking at the gnarled trees that crowded up to the road, Diana thought the gods must be the culprits, but then why didn't they clean up the mess afterward? The orange slash through the forest was ugly and wide enough to hold a Humvee, if it could have balanced on the rocky, rutted, clay surface.

She caught herself reshaping the road in her head, adding a curb on each side to prevent tourists from somersaulting into the forest, whose canopy was level with her waist. The road was morphing into a mogul course—all slick, dull-orange dirt—when a white-tailed tropicbird drew a straight white line across the Kalalau Valley, just as a plane draws a banner across the sky. As if that were a signal, she descended to the beginning of the trail leading to the Alakai Swamp.

She sat down to switch her shoes for *tabi*, which were recommended for this trail. Then she stowed her sneakers in her backpack and donned a hat and windbreaker to shield her binoculars and the bird book from the rain she could see coming. She held the bird book as one might a hymnal in church, and it opened to the plate for the 'o'os. Once, there were four of them:

Oahu, extinct;

Hawaii, extinct;

Bishop's, resurrected on Maui after eighty years;

Kauai: "The only 'o'o to survive in numbers into the 20th century." That was how her bird book put it.

How did she put it? She had come to this island, thousands of miles from her Midwestern home, her estranged husband, her landscaping business, to see a bird that was—at best—a poor relation. The plain, stubby-tailed cousin.

The plain survive, Diana thought, because they are overlooked.

As she shifted her weight, a rock she hadn't noticed made reckless contact with her foot, and she hopped about for a moment, swearing softly under her breath. The *tabi*, she had been told, would allow her to skim over the surface of the trail, but moving that swiftly made her nervous. If she lost her footing, she could easily twist or break her ankle because the glorified socks she was wearing provided no support. She picked her way down the wide orange trail, learning to avoid obstacles as she went along. The air watered her, its touch light on her face and hands and calves.

Deep in the canopy that bordered the trail, birds whistled and chirped, as they had since she arrived at the lookout. She stood still, craning her neck to see them, but there

was no movement. Only sound, from an indeterminate direction. She wanted to plunge into the canopy but could see no easy access.

The trail narrowed. It curved around and through a series of dull red boulders that bulged out above cracks in places, as if someone had tied a string around them. Diana clambered as best she could, sliding her feet carefully into depressions worn long ago in the rock and since filled with mud. It was soothing, this adaptation to the unyielding landscape. She felt no sense that things could be otherwise than they were now, no anxiety that she should have *more*. Perhaps that was the advantage of following a trail—there was nothing to wait for, no response to anticipate and later analyze, as one might plumb the remark of a loved one. This trail was simply one step after another.

As she headed into a dark green tunnel of trees, lit at the bottom by grasses dripping slowly, the birds' voices faded, until all she could hear was the *swish* of her footsteps and the pattering of water on leaves. She stood there a while, in the trees' embrace, thinking of her husband's green eyes when they were in bed. Remembering him watching her, enjoying her reaction instead of sharing it, made her feel self-conscious and strangely aroused here. The space that had cleared between them while their hips touched had grown until she started performing just to get it over with. Until every conversation involved raised voices. They had lived together as if at opposite ends of a long, narrow room. Diana had tried crossing the space, had gone to work at his restaurant in Kansas City, making salads from the garden she had encouraged to take over their yard. But she had found only another kind of distance there, even though she saw him more, talked with him more: the distance of position.

Her third afternoon preparing the salads, she was experimenting with a spinach-fruit mixture. Rejecting the strawberries and mandarin oranges in the cooler, she decided on mango half-moons. Just as she was taking off her apron and fetching her purse, Ian strolled up behind her and slid his arms around her waist.

“Off somewhere already?” he murmured into her ear. Two of the cooks looked up and then turned back to the meat they were slicing, Diana thought, as if they had seen this kind of thing before.

She turned to face him, and he kissed her, making her blush. “Just going to buy some mangoes for the salad,” she said.

Ian shook his head. “Maybe next month,” he told her, playing with her fingers. “Our customers know that the menu changes at the beginning of every month, so I don’t want to start changing mid-month. It would just disappoint them.” He walked over to the cooks and made some small joke. They laughed and glanced at Diana conspiratorially as she slowly donned her apron again. For the rest of the afternoon she kept her eyes on her salads. That had been her last day of work for her husband and, if she were honest with herself, the last day of her marriage.

From that day she had sought out whatever had to do with crossing distance—dancing, travel, birding—to occupy herself while the restaurant claimed Ian. Birding had stuck, taking her away from home in the very early mornings, the only time Ian was regularly at home. Between birding and landscaping, she was gone all day, and he was out all night. Eventually he had filed papers and, two months ago, had dropped off her horizon altogether.

She exited the tunnel and climbed perhaps 8 feet up a sloping wall that had only the shallowest of holds. Several times her feet slipped out of a hold, and she was left clinging to the rock with her hands. As her head cleared the top, fog swept up the cliffs beyond the trail in majestic slow motion, opening itself every so often to show her the sea. Diana's heart was pounding, and her face felt wet. She pulled herself up, arms and shoulders straining, and lay down to catch her breath.

Birdsong and the sensation of cold roused her. Her feet rested on the first of ten steps leading down from the wall, perfectly shaped from ferruginous stone. Hesitantly, Diana scooted forward, and the chill slowly enveloped her feet, then her ankles, and then her knees. The farther she slid her legs down the steps, the colder she felt, and the louder the birds sang. Diana turned her head this way and that, straining to see them, but they hid from her in the canopy, showing only a flash of wing here and there. Abruptly she pulled her legs close to her and turned to descend the wall.

If anything, her heart raced faster now than it had when she had climbed it. She cried in frustration. She had been planning this trip for weeks, and now a weather front on the trail was going to dissuade her. She ought to at least go down the steps. The real danger in the Alakai, after all, was leaving the trail. No one had warned her about steps. They might just be part of the trail.

Diana swung around again, stretching out her right hand: the same frisson of cold. She pushed her face into it, and although the coolness frightened her, it was also refreshing. She pulled herself down the steps by her hands as a child might play on the steps of her home, sliding down headfirst on a pillow.

By the time she tumbled to the bottom, she felt neither frightened nor hurried, simply calm in the midst of this wet, mountainous forest, so much cooler than the Midwestern forests in which she sometimes hiked, and much more crowded, but not with people. A clear trail lay ahead. She paused and turned back, wondering what barrier she had passed, but the steps had no answers.

The trail bent left, skirting the tops of trees. She admired the way their tops branched into an intricate canopy, the way moss softened and warmed their trunks. Where they met the soil far below, huge ferns and grasses spread and drooped. A bird whirred in flight, and Diana turned like a satellite, focusing on movement at the top of the tree canopy. What looked like a red goldfinch fluttered over the red spiky flowers of the ohia lehua tree and bent its short decurved black bill to feed. An apapane, one of the most common native birds in the islands, when what she wanted was the very similar but much rarer iiwi, with its long bill cutting downward like an orange scythe. The two birds often fed together, so she hoped today to see both and judge between them, observe how two beings could be so similar—and yet—one could be so much closer to vanishing than the other.

She pulled out her notepad and recorded the date: December 26, 2001. When her husband had filed for divorce, Diana had cringed at the thought of spending the holidays alone. Then she dreamed up this trip, and she had been right to come. Clearly, everything would fall into place today: the first bird on her list had a name beginning with the letter A.

Leaves twitched in the canopy farther down the trail. At first she blamed the wind, but then a small greenish bird climbed headfirst down one branch and up another, probing.

Kauai amakihi.

To its right, a brown wrenlike bird cocked its tail and whistled.

Elepaio.

And beyond them, the same apanane landed on an ohia lehua flower. Diana turned her head slightly, and her neck cracked. All the birds ceased feeding and stared at her the only way birds can, in profile. In the year since she had taken up birding, she couldn't remember being sized up by one bird, let alone a trio. But it was only fair for them to watch her too. She laughed loudly and then clapped her hand over her mouth, afraid she would flush them.

The apanane flitted down the trail, barely opening its wings, and the others followed in the same order. Only the elepaio remained in view. Diana trotted after it and then halted.

A tabletop extended out of a curved wall of soft red stone, set with plates carved from the same material, in a small gleaming clearing that was really a room. Its walls opaqued the trees. Next to the table sat a stack of rocks that served as a grill, and there Ian stood, turning two silvery fish on flat bright stones within a plume of smoke.

He finished what he was doing and came up to her, folding her hand into his, and smiled. "Diana," he said, "it's so good to see you."

His hand felt warm and firm. Diana thought she might cry again at his touch; she had missed how being in his arms could make her feel like a thing of great beauty.

“What are you doing here, Ian? Did you follow me?”

He looked puzzled. “No, I live here.”

“You used to live with me in Bonner Springs. Remember?”

“We did?” He opened her hand and stared at her palm. “Were we married?”

“Yes.”

“Was I good to you?”

It was odd question, one she had never expected to hear from Ian, and she clenched her hand around his. He flinched. “You were never there.”

“Well, I’m always here,” he told her, sliding his arm around her waist. Their faces nearly touched. “I remember you, Diana, and I know I love you, but I don’t remember any other life but this.”

He guided her over to the table, picked up the plates, and returned to the grill. When he brought them back full of fish and greens, he put them down with that particular flourish he had always used in his restaurant, as if he were pointing out prizes in a game show. Diana giggled. He handed her a broad, short wooden fork and a similar knife. They sat down together on two polished stumps, shoulders touching, and ate for a while. The scales of this fish had a slightly sour taste that Diana liked.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Ian asked. “Not too many small bones.”

She nodded. She had dreamed once of a Hawaiian honeymoon with him, but then she had filled it with beaches and bars. This scene, the pressure of her husband’s hip and shoulder against her, comforted her. She had expected to spend the holidays mourning, but the plane flight on Christmas Day had been unexpectedly festive, and now she was here, in a situation that was nothing if not otherworldly. She wondered if she touched Ian,

if they made love, whom would she be caressing? He felt substantial enough, but was he real?

He took her hand and pointed it upward at the trees. “Do you like them?”

Finally, Diana thought.

Iwi. Dozens of them. More, she was sure, than survived on all the islands put together. Ten times as many flowers on which to feed.

He looked at her, his eyes neither expectant nor insistent, gently taking her in. “I have everything here,” he said. She put her head on his shoulder, and they sat without conversing, while the land around them bent in the rain.

Later he tried to lead her into the swamp, but Diana protested when he stepped off the trail.

“You’ll sink, Ian,” she said, refusing to move. He swayed in front of her, balancing on a hummock of grass and holding out his hands.

“Was I really that untrustworthy, Diana? Are you that frightened of me?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to get stuck in the mud.”

“You won’t. At most, you’ll get a little muddy.”

Then she let him lead her, sometimes on a trail and sometimes off. He showed her the tree cavities where ‘o‘os had nested months ago. They followed a stream no wider than Diana’s boot, and when she took a drink, it tasted pungent, almost like basil.

A new group of birds descended on the trees, calling almost like meadowlarks. Diana gasped. At least ten pairs of Kauai ‘o‘os, a crown of white pollen circling their

sooty heads when they lifted them from flowers. They chased each other ceaselessly at first. Then they stopped squabbling over the best nectar and began to flutter as a group in one direction, cocking their pointed tails. Ian took Diana's head in his hands and kissed her for a long time. When she pulled back, she could see only a few of them, and she stumbled after them, hopping from one bunch of grass to another.

Ian caught up to her again and put his arm around her. "Don't you want to stay?"

"Yes!" Diana said. "I want to see the 'o'os." She pointed. "Let's follow them."

"Let's stay here," he said. They had halted in a strangely dry meadow. He pulled her down to her knees on the grass.

The 'o'os had paused at one tree; they seemed to be waiting for her, fluttering up and down the flowers and making soft calls. Diana moved back into Ian's embrace, and he kissed her until she felt dizzy.

"Do you remember the restaurant?" she asked him. "Me working with you?"

He ran his fingers up and down her sides. "No," he said, kissing her neck and rolling on top of her. Diana looked up at the 'o'os, which seemed to be sadly shaking their heads at her. She tried to move out from under him.

"Stay," he whispered. "Perfection has a way of growing on you."

How right his words seemed. Diana grasped at reasons she should leave, but she couldn't remember much, except a lot of digging, moving plants around, arranging landscapes. Why had she bothered? She tried to see the 'o'os again but couldn't, and sharp terror made her push Ian off her and run toward their voices. As at the beginning of the day, they hid themselves, fluttering through the canopy, but she followed them, stumbling through the swamp until she came again to the trail and the steps and leapt up

them two at a time. She turned around, panting: no Ian, no rare birds. She looked down, and the cube of red stone on which she was standing, just wide enough for both feet, protruded seamlessly from the wall she had climbed up earlier that day. She slid down the wall and into the mud and sprinted back up the trail, not caring when she fell and skinned her knees or her ankle cracked painfully.

It was midnight when she returned to her B&B and took a shower. The red mud streamed down the drain as if she had brought back the entire swamp with her. Then she got into bed and finished her list, which was short but included one of the rarest birds on the planet. Few birders could say as much. She stared at the date for a long time: on the day after salvation was born, she had learned that she couldn't abide perfection. Had she stayed with this more attentive Ian, would it have saved her? Would she have forgotten everyone and everything, become a statistic on some milk carton? She wrapped her arms around herself and sobbed, fiercely wanting him to touch her more.