

El Nino

"Kapeku ka leo o ke kai, o ho'oilo ka malamā."

When the voice of the sea is harsh, the winter months have come.

Olelo No'eau, Hawaiian Proverb, by Mary Kawena Pukui

Out at Honolua Bay, the sun was down low when the perfect set rolled in. She paddled hard. Screaming over the curl, she locked-in, and stormed a move. She snapped it off the rail, rockin' it high. She drives it through the barrel, and disappears inside the bowl. As the huge wave starts to close out, she fires out the backside, pulls it up and grabs a little air. It was the best ride of the day by far.

She paddles to shore as the sunsets and walks up the steep trail to the bluff. She rinses-off her board, and hair, from a big jug of water in the back of her little truck. She slides her surfboard into the bed and throws the tailgate up. She heads to work.

Her family ran the local luau. TE'ALANI, was a dancer and host when she wasn't surfing. She didn't surf for competition, although she could be world champion. She'd been offered sponsorships from everyone.

Te'alani was a local surfing legend, who helped to run the family business, and she was tired of it. It was an *El Nino* year and she just wanted to surf, to surf for him, ...for them.

She grew-up on a ranch, up in Launiupoko, where rainbows lived, high in the West Maui Mountains. She was *hapa*; a mix of Hawaiian, Asian, Caucasian and usually something else.

Someone at school had called her ..."chop suey " once when she was a little girl. She hit them smack in the nose. It bled a lot, all over the playground. She was suspended. Her family was mortified.

"Te'a", her Pa pi would call her. He spoke gently. Her Makuakāne, *father*, was a beautiful, kind man. "Maybe you learn surf, we make surfboard for you, more better." So off to his shaper shed, they fled. Together, they built her first board, shaping, sanding and filing. They wore masks and he kicked her out when they used the chemicals.

She still had that board. Tucked in her Pa pi's shed. Now over grown, out in the yard behind the ohana, behind the old homestead. The abandoned shack made her cry. She just stood there, looking at it and remembering.

The greatest surfers would come from all over the world to get one of Pa pi's boards. She met them all.

Te'alani hadn't spent much time at the ranch, since Pa pi died. She lived out toward 'the Bay' now, where she can hear the pounding surf all night. It helps her sleep.

The ranch was being sold, subdivided, like some of the other old properties. Her family would keep the upper acreage.

Rain clouds were rolling over the mountains. A beam of light breaks through, and a rainbow peaks out. Te'a sighs and walks toward the shed. She whispers, "...It's an *El Nino* this year Pa pi, and we're crushing it!"

"Te'a", someone calls her name from the other direction. They call again, "Where are you?" "Out here..." Tea turns around toward the voice, "...what?" She looks up. Cool drops of water were beginning to fall lightly on her face.

She leaves the shed for another time, again.

Te'a walks under a ripe Mango tree. No one knew why, but this tree ripened early every year. She scoops a fat juicy fruit from the ground. She peels back the skin and sucks off the sweet yellow meat between her teeth. "Where you?" the voice calls again. She just wanted to get in her truck and drive home. "I'm coming, Auntie".

It was raining as she headed down the mountain, past all the gates and fences. She thought about how there was never a locked gate anywhere when she grew up here.

They rode horses all over the valleys and ridges and down to the beach then, where she and Pa pi would fish.

Te'alani now lived out by Honokeanu Cove, on the south side of the little bay, where sea turtles thrived. Her studio was perched out on a rocky point. She could surf right there, alone, and anytime. The winter swell was an excuse for not dealing with anything, or anyone, and there was big one rolling in from the west.

The family was planning a special day to remember Pa pi. It had almost been ten years. She didn't need to remember, she never forgot. His ceremony was perfect enough. It had been at Honolua Bay. They laid his ashes out on the water, surrounded by leis and surfers, and song and blessings. What if she didn't go? Te'a crawled into her bed. The waves surged below, drowning out her thoughts. She fell sleep.

She awoke early. The sun hadn't crested the mountains. She stepped out on the lanai in her bathing suit. The storm had passed, and fat glossy sets were rolling in.

Te'a grabbed her board off a rack, and walked down and out, over the rocks. Careful of her footing, she waited for the water to recede to launch herself, and the board, into the ocean.

She fearlessly paddled through the big waves, duck-diving under, until she was out to where the big break forms at the edge of the outside reef.

A huge set takes shape within her reach. Te'a paddles hard and drops in, sliding down the curl, she takes the ride, and the next one and the next one. She loses track of time. She loses track of her life, until too many surfers were out in the water, reminding her how much she wished they weren't there. And, anyway, she was hungry. She had some laulau her Auntie had given her. The tender pork and seafood was carefully wrapped in the soft taro leaves, and lovingly prepared Hawaiian style to perfection. Te'a kept thinking about the food, as she paddled back to her little hide-away.

She dries herself off in the sun, devouring the meal.

Te'alani loved her family. She knew they were worried about her, but they always acted like they weren't, so she just went along with it. But things were starting to feel different. Maybe it was the big surf this year. But, what ever it was, she sure would love another laulau, and licked her fingers clean.

She didn't go to work that day. She went to the property instead. Te'a got out of the truck and unlocked the big iron gate, drove through, got out and locked it up again. She drove up the dirt road, through fields of bananas, papayas, coffee and coconuts. The buyers were rich hippie-ha'ole types who had big bucks and organic dreams.

She cuts-off on another dirt road and heads up to the homestead. She parks her little truck by the small ohana. Te'a turns off the engine. The silence was comforting.

She steps out of the truck. She wants to scream, but she never would, not here. Underwater she could scream, it felt safe. She always wondered if anyone could hear her. Maybe the ocean was the only one who really knew the storm that lived inside her.

She pulls clippers out of her truck, and puts gloves on. She lays a tarp out on the ground. She walks to the shed and slowly and carefully cuts the lush ferns, fuchsias and vines back from the windows. She lovingly places the cuttings on the tarp, into a bouquet. "Hey Pa pi", she thought, "...you'd be laughing at me, seeing me doing this, cleaning up the shed".

The door squeaked as she pushed it open and stepped inside.

Her beloved father's imprint was everywhere she looked. She propped herself against the door. She could barely breath. It had been ten years, but it felt like yesterday. There were board 'blanks', hunks and chunks of unshaped Styrofoam, stacked on the floor. Surfboards were mounted on the walls, in different phases of completion, ...and the empty soda cans, vintage bottles, signs and tools, and Hawaiian sayings on the walls were all reminders. And there it was ...

Standing in the corner was the board, the first board, her board. She had a pain in her heart when she saw her name painted on it, "*Te'a #1*" it read. She gently ran her fingers over the letters, over the smooth surface, still perfect.

For once, she didn't need to hold her breath, or hide her tears in the water, or in the rain, she cried in the sanctuary of the sacred little shed, until she finally stopped. A gecko chirped and scampered across the wall.

Te'alani wasn't sure why, but it all felt right. Maybe it was the El Nino, which had separated herself from her past, from her sorrow. But, whatever it was, it felt right again. It just all felt so very right.

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