

"The Old Woman and the Writer"

By John A. Hart

Paul quickly scribbled the first line of his new novel beneath all of his other rejected first lines onto the almost-full notebook page: *It was a dark and stormy night.*

He groaned and scratched it out, sending it into literary oblivion with the others. The phrase may have satisfied Snoopy over the decades, but he knew he could do better. His royalty checks proved it.

*Go ahead,* the notebook seemed to taunt. *Prove it.*

He stared across the channel toward Lanai, but he neither looked at it nor acknowledged its existence as he mindlessly weaved his pen through his fingers like a cheerleader working her baton. Unrelated and half-formed words, phrases and ideas repeatedly bashed themselves against the inside of his skull and made his temples throb. The solution had to be somewhere in that mess. If he could manage the traffic jam in his mind and clear out the irrelevant clutter he might be able to shift out of creative neutral.

Wait! He felt a phrase claw its way through the disorder. This could be the breakthrough he'd been looking for. Before he lost the thought, he jotted it down on the last space on the page.

*It was a dark and stormy night on Maui.*

He let out a strangled scream and flung the notebook into the waves below. Maybe he couldn't do better after all.

It wasn't this difficult when he wrote his first novel three years ago. It was right here, while leaning against the railing that stretched between the Wyland Gallery and Cheeseburger in Paradise, that he'd become entranced by the way the sea foam swirled around a pair of lava rocks stuck in the narrow stretch of sand beneath him. Something inside him clicked and the words poured out of him in a creative torrent. In a week he had his first draft.

While his book never reached the upper ranks of the *New York Times* Best-Seller List and his name never became as well-known as Michener or Brennert, he found enough success to earn a contract for a second book. For more than a year he failed to come up with a half-decent storyline and characters worthy of a follow-up. He even tried to replicate the experience back home by hanging out along San Francisco's Embarcadero, but all the harsh city sounds and smells as well as the overall pressures of mainland life left him more frustrated than inspired. After months of futility he finally acknowledged he had writer's block and needed to return to the place where the Muses had blessed him once before.

So far, it hadn't worked. Those twin rocks that had defied the waves for years and sparked that undefinable something inside him had vanished - probably stolen by an insensitive tourist as a souvenir who didn't care what they meant to

somebody else. He hoped some angry Hawaiian deity inflicted an appropriately satisfying curse on the offender. And the creative block that he tried so desperately to leave behind on the mainland had dogged him across the Pacific.

How he wished he could pen something. Even writing a silly short story about a cat meeting a mermaid would have been progress.

He turned away from the stunning view and gazed along Front Street. Since it was still early in the morning, most of the shops hadn't opened and the tourists had yet to spill out of their hotels and condos and disembark from the cruise ship at anchor out in the channel. Delivery trucks took advantage of the empty streets to make their rounds. Paul loved Lahaina when it was quiet like this; he felt this was when the town's true spirit showed itself before it had to put on airs for the visitors.

A delivery truck suddenly slammed on its brakes and shattered the calm in a scream of tires. Its nose jerked to a halt barely two feet from the old woman who stood defiantly in the crosswalk. The horrified driver leapt out of the truck's cab. "Are you okay, Auntie? I didn't see you there!"

"No harm done, dearie," she assured him.

She took an uneasy step forward, and Paul caught her before she toppled over. Her creped skin radiated with so much heat she

felt almost untouchable. Her long gray hair flowed down her back and looked like silvery threads woven into her red-and-orange flame-pattered *muumuu*. As Paul gently led her to the *makai* side of Front Street, he asked, "Is there somebody I should call to come get you?"

"No, thank you, dearie. I do have an older sister, but you don't want to meet her. She's a real..." She said a Hawaiian word Paul didn't know, but he got the gist of it. "However, I could use a little nip of gin. You wouldn't happen to have any with you?"

Paul shook his head.

"A pity," she sighed. "Perhaps you would be so kind and walk this tired old woman to the banyan tree."

She seemed far from old and tired to Paul. He could have told her that he was too busy, but too busy doing what? Banging his head against the railing in exasperation? He offered her his arm. "Madame, I would be honored."

As they walked south along Front Street she asked him, "Why are you here in Hawai'i?" She pronounced it in the traditional manner with the "v" sound for the "w".

"Work," he told her. "I'm writing my second novel, but it's not going so well."

"That is not why you are here," she insisted gently. "Why are you here in Hawai'i?"

"I told you..."

"No!" The anger in her voice resounded like a thunder clap. "You are not here to write a second book. That is merely the excuse that you have convinced yourself is true. Tell me, Paul: *why are you here in Hawai'i?*"

"How do you know my name? I didn't..."

"Answer the question," she instructed calmly.

The old woman's words felt like a spear driven deep into his heart. "I've lost something and I'm trying to find it."

"Ah, now we get to the truth. You are searching for your *mana loa*, your great power, and re-light the fire that had once burned within you. Now, tell me how you really feel."

"Lost," he conceded. "I can't write. My words - my *mana* - have abandoned me."

She shook her head. "Your words are not your *mana*. They are tools that you use to express your *mana*. Your *mana* brought you to this island to write your first book. You must find it again. Only then will your words return."

He should have been shocked that she knew so much about him when he hadn't revealed a thing. "If words aren't my *mana*, then what is? How do I find it, and where do I start looking for it?"

"Start here." She gently pressed her warm hand against his chest above his heart. Then she gestured around them in a grand, sweeping arc. "*Mana* is everywhere. It is in you, me, the fish,

the animals, even the rocks in the sand that stand firm against the tide."

"But the rocks are gone," he lamented, "Like my *mana*."

"Have you heard nothing that I said? Your *mana* is inside you and cannot be taken away. You have become so entangled in your mainland worries that you have forgotten it is here waiting for you to call upon it."

"What do I do? How do I begin?"

"Put aside all of your mainland torments. They do not exist here. Do not try to write because you are not ready to write. Open yourself up to the *mana* that is Maui and let it fill your soul. Discover the power that is the heart and soul of this island. When you do, you will find your *mana loa* and your words will return."

She released his arm. "I think I will walk the rest of the way on my own. You have something more important to do than escort a silly old woman to the banyan tree."

As she toddled along the sidewalk, Paul called out, "What's your name?"

She turned back and smiled. Her old crone façade melted away and revealed the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her loose-fitting *muumuu* transformed into a form-fitting garment of actual flames that swirled around her. "Pele," she said in a voice that sang.

He gasped. The mighty volcano goddess herself? He wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen her with his own eyes.

"Stop by my home in Kilauea the next time you're on the Big Island. We'll have another chat. Bring some gin with you." Then she winked at him. "You'll be pleased to know the person who stole those rocks is pretty miserable right now."

She walked away, and after a couple of steps she disappeared. All she left behind was a set of smoldering footprints on the sidewalk.