



LOST & FOUND IN PARADISE

BY MARCIA ZINA MAGER

I never wanted to move to Hawai‘i. As a hardcore New Yorker, I believed the sun rose and set in Manhattan. Moving to Hawai‘i was like going to the moon.

But in 1992, because of my ocean-loving fiancé, I moved 5,000 miles away to the most isolated spot on earth: the Hawaiian Islands.

My first impression of O‘ahu, particularly downtown Honolulu, with its clean, uncluttered sidewalks and smattering of office buildings was to gasp: “*You call this a city??!*”

People were smiling! Men wore colorful aloha shirts, not drab gray suits! Where were the crowds, deafening subways, the sensory overload of noise and smells?!

My first dose of the startling ethnic differences came one day when I met a pair of construction workers outside my apartment. In Manhattan, construction workers meant only one thing: Muscle-bound men in hard hats, sipping Styrofoam cups of coffee, shouting lewd comments at the women walking by.

But that morning I came face to face with two curly-haired, dark-skinned giants from Tonga who looked like they burst from a children’s fairytale! In Manhattan, Puerto Ricans and African-Americans were the norm. Pacific Islanders, from tiny, exotic countries, lived only on the pages of National Geographic.

They smiled and said softly, “Howzit?” I stared back, speechless. Then, to my astonishment, one of them shimmied up a nearby palm tree and plucked a coconut. He tossed it down to his friend who caught it as nonchalantly as one catches an apple, and then whacked it in half with a gleaming machete! Their morning coffee break turned out to be sipping fresh, sweet coconut milk right of the shell.

Where on earth was I?????

As the months and years flowed by, my jagged Manhattan edges began softening. My hassled, nose-to-the-grindstone pace slowed.

Now when I’m caught in traffic on Queen Lili‘uokalani Freeway (H1), I smile. Because unlike the Brooklyn Queens Expressway in New York, where you sit bumper to bumper frowning at ugly factories and graffiti-covered billboards, here you gaze at glittering rainbows arching across the sky; lush green mountains that look as if they were carved out of jade; a turquoise ocean that puts east coast beaches to shame.

Sure I still miss things about New York: The late-night sidewalk cafes; driving upstate to see the autumn leaves...

But O‘ahu offers treasures as well. Like the time at Honolulu Airport when a young man, dripping in beautiful flowered lei, walked into the waiting area where I was sitting, trailed by a dozen family and friends. After a shower of farewell kisses, someone pulled out a ‘ukulele and began strumming. The young man jumped up and, without an ounce of self-consciousness, danced the hula for his friends and family, his face lit with joy. I fought back tears.

Could I live in Manhattan again? I don’t think so. Not when I have days like last Sunday at Three Tables, a peaceful North Shore beach, where an endangered Monk seal crawled onto the sand and plopped down right near my family for his afternoon snooze. Thanks to him, we had an unforgettable day.

Clearly I’ve changed. My harried New Yorker genes have been altered; transformed, forever, by a young man’s hula, a sleepy seal, and the soft smiles of construction workers enjoying their sweet morning snack.