



ERIC DILLENBERGER

# Begin With An Outline

*a short story by* KAUI HART HEMMINGS

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## Setting

My dad still has the secret ranch on the Big Island. It looks like a banana plantation, but it isn't. The banana plants don't extend very far within the ranch's perimeter. The bananas are a lie.

I am asked to reveal what I remember. I remember red dirt roads, steel gates, and signs painted with the words NO TRESPASSING. I remember the large holes in the ground, pits covered with blankets of grass. One of the holes was filled with sand so I could have a sandbox to play in. I remember the bananas — apple bananas, small and sweet. Lies can taste good. I haven't been to the ranch in fifteen years.

Besides the bananas, my dad raises chickens and grows red ginger and marijuana. I'm not sure how large his drug operation is or how much money he makes. I know that he smokes a lot of pot, but not so much for recreational purposes. It's more about testing his wares. He rolls joints. He doesn't own a bong, hookah, pipe, chillum, vaporizer, scale, dugout system, grinder, or steamroller. He's old school.

I currently live in Colorado and am about to graduate from an expensive liberal-arts college where students try their best to look dirty and poor. These kids love their pot accessories, and they like to make sure their apparatuses are unique. They buy pipes with unusual shapes and give them names such as the "Purple Devil" or the "Reverend."

There are many types of potheads here: The hippie smokers tossing Frisbees out on the quad. The blunt-smoking variety sitting on porch steps, mouthing Eazy-E lyrics and dipping their heads in time to break beats. There are the wake-and-bakers, who roll out of bed and feed immediately, loading their devices as if preparing bowls of oatmeal. The most common type of smoker is the kind who lives by the clock, practitioner of the righteous 4:20 dorm-room bong hit.

What kind of smoker am I? I'm none of the above. For me pot is something else entirely. It's my home, my original setting. It's my father. It could have been my inherited trade. Like steel, or plastics, or blacksmithing, it's all in the family; it gets passed on.

My dad used to send me samples from his plantation every now and then, reminding me he was still in business — delivering his message via shimmering buds, hairy and fat beneath the brown packaging and coffee beans, seriously reeking.

## Choosing A Subject

I shouldn't write about my father. In one of his novels, Charles Dickens creates a horrendous character modeled on his father. When people read the novel, though, they sympathize with the character. I don't want to make that mistake.

I guess I'll say that my dad's Hawaiian, Tahitian, Samoan, et cetera — a mutt — but I won't give him a name. I guess I'll say that he no longer sends me packages because four months ago he was arrested, and he currently lives in jail. The prosecutor, Allen Bernard, wants me to reveal what I remember about

the ranch: I tell him I remember red dirt roads.

When I was six, my mother had to leave my father. She admitted she needed essentials, like a BMW and white leather pants. She was twenty-five and past the slumming-it stage. It was time to return to her upper-middle-class roots, and she took me with her. We moved to Oahu and forgot.

Her name is Madeline. Maddie. She is what you would call a "go-getter." She plans parties. That's her job. She focuses on details. She wraps tent poles with *ti* leaves. She puts glitter in pools. Nothing is spared. To make up for those preschool years I spent in squalor, she treated me to good things: tennis camp, private school, a miniature horse named Rambo, a white Volkswagen Cabriolet. In our new life there were social ladders everywhere, and my mother climbed them with ease. I can't imagine her living on the ranch: my bleached-blond mother in generic jeans gazing upon the fat of the land from her spot on top of the food chain. She says she was rebelling against her parents but grew tired of it because they weren't watching and, in her words, "rebellion was so *unfashionable*. I always looked like an activist, or a *feminist*."

When I ask her about our old rustic life, she tells me how cute I was, running around naked. My chore was to feed the chickens, and she says I would stand on a footstool to scatter the corn so the chickens knew who was boss.

Now she is married to a strapping banker. He's heavy in the ass, a slurper of soup and a wearer of small running shorts. Hugh. He used to be an infamous lifeguard who entertained female tourists by saving them when they weren't drowning. He was known for wearing slacks and collared shirts to the beach, and for a brief time in the late sixties the look caught on. Hugh influenced fashion trends.

## Significant Details

My dad called me on some birthdays: my tenth, my thirteenth, my fifteenth. The conversations were always an exercise in call-and-response, similar to the blues, yet without the passion and distress, leaving only the humor and double meanings. I haven't gotten a phone call in a long time. Before he went to jail there were just smelly packages with the occasional note. His last note read: "They got planes circling my property. Planes with heat detectors. I don't use heat lamps, you *lolos!* Keep on circling! Aloha, Dad."

The note also said that the police were destroying his crops, and that weed was decreasing in popularity due to the meth epidemic — in his words, "Locals like tweak now. Factory jobs. Pot, forget it."

The prosecutor, Allen Bernard, wants me to testify against my father. I don't know all the details, not even what he's charged with, but I know Allen Bernard isn't concerned with whether my father has sent me marijuana. He wants to know what I remember about the ranch. What was it like growing up there? What did the property look like? Were there pit traps covered with blankets of grass? Did I ever fall into one of these traps?

Apparently a little girl wandered off from her house and fell into a very big man-made hole. My dad got her out. My dad says he wasn't aware of any marijuana growing on his three-hundred-acre property or of any holes. He would have filled them in if he had known of their existence. Allen Bernard is sure he did know of their existence, and he's looking for me to help impeach my father's testimony.

Allen Bernard doesn't realize that I don't know my father. He doesn't realize because I'm too ashamed to tell him. He says there's no stronger bond than the one between a father and a daughter, and that he understands if my memory isn't "up to par." "But you know what's right and what's wrong," he says. "And you'll do what's right, because you love him."

"Yes," I say. "I love him." I want to please Allen Bernard. There's something about his voice that makes me want to wear an apron and cook meatloaf constantly. I tell Allen Bernard that I'm highly conflicted and tormented. "I don't know if I remember holes in the ground. I remember the roads, the chickens. I was just a little girl." I love our dramatic conversations. I imagine him on the other end of the phone: chestnut hair, a wad of gum on his tongue, fingers snapping for his assistant to hand him a notepad and pen. Sex-y.

"Does your father frighten you?" he once asked.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Bernard," I said. "Very, very much."

## Regional Dialect

Since age six, I have seen my dad twice. He's like a whale that way: rarely surfacing. My most recent sighting came the year I graduated from high school. My grandmother on his side invited me to their family reunion that summer — she said it was about time I met my relatives.

At the reunion my dad and I talked between rounds of drunken ukulele fun. He had an earring, a tattoo, and a beer. He was tan and muscled. He looked like someone I would make out with. That was weird. I asked if I could visit him, and he said, "Yeah. We'll see." I asked for his phone number. He said he'd give it to me later. I wondered why he didn't want me around, why he didn't invite me to the ranch. I could clearly picture myself there. I imagined living with him — being an outlaw, being wanted. Sometimes, in my fantasies, I brought my life on Oahu with me. In my imagination, it all worked out. My mother would be redecorating the ranch house, creating the illusion of space with mirrors and bold stripes. Hugh would be there, too, adding that special yucky something, a key ingredient, like baking soda. The banker, the decorator, the drug lord, and the child. An odd, yet functional, family unit.

At the party we ate sea urchins and *opih*i shells — creatures he had plucked from reefs earlier that day.

"Why don't you want me to visit?" I asked.

"Here," he said. "I got something for you."

He searched through his backpack and brought out a jean jacket cut in a distinct eighties style, but not in a cool, retro sort of way. It was obviously from the children's department, perhaps the young-teen racks. I put it on. The cuffs were at my

elbows. The waistband was about five inches below my boobs. I turned up the collar.

"A cropped jean jacket," I said. "I love it, Dad." I wanted to say the word *dad*. His effort made me so hopeful. It made me feel normal. I didn't care that the jacket was acid-washed, sold by Sears, worn by the New Kids on the Block. I thought that this must be what families did — buy each other bad gifts and say thank you. "Thank you, Dad." I gave him a hug and pretended I was a girl with a good father. I asked for his phone number again, and he squeezed me hard and began to sing. He had a falsetto voice, beautiful and steady. He sang "The Queen's Prayer," a haunting, mournful song the last Hawaiian queen wrote in jail while the monarchy was being overthrown. I knew the English translation; in grade school we'd been forced to memorize it in chapel. "Forgive the sins of man," the song said. "Your mercy is as high as heaven." Was he sending me a message?

"Why are you singing this?" I asked.

"It's what the band's playing," he said, and I heard the faint strumming. At the "amen" we stopped hugging. Our eyes were wet. We looked away from each other.

"Sad song," I said.

"Going to get a beer," he said.

I never got his number. I wasn't angry with him, though I wanted to be. It's hard to explain. Logically, I should have been upset. All I wanted then — and have wanted for some time now — was for him to want to see me. I have wanted to return to my original home. But at the reunion I wasn't angry. I was drunk. I sat at the table and looked at the food: the black lumps of boneless bodies coming out of their hard shells. I felt my own body encased in that jacket, arms paralyzed by the unyielding sleeves, back pushing against the seams. I thought that maybe this was how life was supposed to be — nothing's supposed to be contained. Outsides will stay the same, but the insides will grow and grow. Nothing will ever fit, and that's the way everything will fit — by not fitting.

That night a little cousin introduced me to everyone as her "auntie" and kept trying to hold my hand. I walked around among the strangers, my family, thinking of liquids: the sperm that made me, his blood that's in me, the sweat on this cousin's small hand, all hidden. I had to talk pidgin or not talk at all with this side of the family in order for them to like me and not think I was some white bitch. Here's a bit of conversation:

Them: "Keolani, girl, how you been? Long time no see, ah? You going schoo on da mainlan? Ho, you smart, ah? Like Erin Brockovich."

Me: "Yeah."

*(end of excerpt)*