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Surviving Kalalau

Through switchbacks, stepping as gracefully as possible, over and around souls still present on that mountain, fearing everything, yet feeling no fright, I have gazed deeply into the face of danger. Now, four years later, as I ponder those mind-altering events on that eleven-mile trail onto the most enlightening and breathtaking beach I, undeservingly, experienced, I wonder if I will ever truly finish the most challenging life trial I have ever faced.

I recall that frenzy-filled Hawaiian morning, however long ago, as if it were yesterday. Clothes flying into hiking packs, thoughts thick with consequence, amerced in regret, with sensitive brains and bellies, and riddled with questions about the night before. No time to ask or clarify what we had drunkenly discussed the previous evening, our ride was just about to leave. "Hurry up, grab everything you need, but don't pack your pack too heavy, remember it was Ian's, and it's too big for your hips," my boyfriend, Kale, instructed me. "I'll get the food in my pack, you carry your sleeping pad, the small blanket, only a few extra clothes, and please don't take your makeup, it takes up too much space; just bring the essentials."

"Plus, it's not like we are going to be seeing many people on the trail after a certain point anyway." Ian offered.

"Hey, Kale, you said you've got food, right?" Cameron yelled from the living room to the kitchen of the beachfront condo Ian's mother had, graciously, allowed us all to stay for our 19-day adventure in Kauai, HI.

"Yeah, I got it," Kale answered. Soon, Cameron and Ian were packed up, ready to go, and anxiously ushering Kale and me to hurry and finish our packing. I remember thinking, though fragments of an intoxicated conversation lingered in my mind, I didn't even know we were leaving today. I was told on the horseshoe ride from the west coast of the island to the east, we had discussed in small detail the journey that lay ahead. They had all tried to talk me out of going, and both Kale and I were under the impression that the hike was an eleven mile loop, not eleven miles in and back out.

Our driver was an elderly yet spry, Hawaiian-born lady, a neighboring condo renter, living only doors down from Ian's mother, with tan skin, a raspy voice, and the longest salt colored arm hair I had ever seen. I found myself getting lost observing the winding locks as they blew in the cool breeze of the quiet Prius air conditioner. She was a delightfully happy and warm woman, titling every youngster as her grandson or granddaughter. We stopped, halfway through our drive, for a bite to eat at a Hawaiian burger stand, a local favorite, and headed on our way again.

Ten miles from the trailhead, we realized we were missing a few vital supplies and stopped at the last Ace Hardware. Kale and I scrambled in to gather what we needed when, suddenly, my stomach began to feel really uneasy, my skin began to crawl with goose bumps accompanied by

slimy beads of sweat, my throat became dry, and my mouth filled far too much with saliva. I barely made it to the restrooms in time to answer to the porcelain gods for my actions on my body the night before.

The rest of the trip to the trailhead seemed to fly by a little too quickly for my stomach to handle, but everything in me was dead set on going. I didn't know much about the trail, other than Ian was interning doing something with the conservation, later finding out the team was helicoptered in to do their daily tasks, and it was Ian's first time hiking into Kalalau Beach as well.

"You've only been on one other hike in your whole life, V, and that was two miles of all cake trail. This one's not really for beginners, and dude, you just blew chunks in the Ace Hardware bathroom. Are you sure you don't want to just ride back to the condos?" Ian said, w pushing for me to throw in the towel.

"I'm going. I didn't ride all the way here to just turn back now. I'll be fine. Plus, I'm already feeling much better." (I wasn't) I replied, determinately, nodding my head in certainty and acknowledgement of the look of questioning and concern on Kale's face,

"Alright then. Let's do this. We're wasting daylight, and I can't wait to see this shit, guys!" Cameron anxiously pleaded. So we said our thank you and goodbyes to our gracious chauffeur and set off onto the start of the trail. At first, it wasn't all that bad, though for the first two miles, I had something sticking right into my upper back from an increasingly uncomfortable object I had failed to place strategically in my pack. We stopped for breathers and adjustments here and there, and for hours, I managed to keep my complaints inside. But as the trail became a little more like climbing up and back down than walking, my back started to send me shooting pains radiating up my neck and down my legs. Please tell me we are almost there, I begged inside. Kale noticed my discomfort and called up the trail to Ian. "Hey! Ian! We almost there, man?"

"Uh, yeah, this mile marker up here should tell us how far we are from camp," Ian answered. There were plenty of tall-standing, shady Hawaiian trees and vines surrounding us for much of the first six miles in, which started to make me angry as my health began to decline again. I want to see the damn ocean, I thought. Kale and I agreed on that at least, and when we got up to the mile marker, Ian informed us we still had another mile to go. Awesome, I thought, that means we aren't far from the water. I was sweltering hot from the long and difficult hike, and my body ached for a nice cool rinse. That last mile was more difficult than the first five, as my back really began throbbing, and I realized, because my body was too small for the pack I was wearing, it was not able to do the job it was designed to do to keep my back from taking most of the weight. The pack was supposed to snap snugly around my hips, but in reality, it was up more around my waist. This, I was told, would not turn out well for me.

Looking back now, I can laugh at my utter surprise and disgust when I realized there would be no water, no cool wash, no soft sand to sleep on, no change of scenery, rain was a constant struggle at night, and Kale and I were the only ones who had brought food. Our friends had assumed we were packed with more than enough for all, when really it was an amount designed for two. The sun had suddenly gone missing, and it was getting hard to see as we rushed to find

a place to set up camp for the night. It was not a good sleep, not one bit of it. My back worsened from sleeping on the hand-me-down Therm-a-Rest that Kale had given me.

We woke to heavy rains, no one wanting to leave their tents. I tried to get up, but a sharp pain stopped me dead in my tracks. My back was stiff, and a slight move sent me into horrible pain. The guys discussed outside the tent what to do. Kale was more concerned about easing my pain than anything. So they informed me they were going to see if there were any fellow hikers with something that might help. They returned before long and informed me that they had met a female hiker named Rebecca, who offered a Hawaiian remedy: Ginger root. They said I was to chew on it, handing me a piece about an inch long and as round as my pinky finger, and it would no doubt make me drowsy for a while. So, I chewed the whole thing and fell into a deep sleep quickly. I woke to Kale offering me breakfast, and to my surprise, I could move with much more ease. I escaped from the confines of the tent, but was still very sleepy, nodding off as I ate. They kept asking how I was feeling, as I had lain back down for another nap in the tent. Rebecca stopped by and inquired as to the state of my health. They explained I had been sleeping for a long time, and it had been four hours since I had fallen asleep with the root in my mouth. I was later informed that the piece I had been given was too big. She told them I only needed a sliver, but now that it was too late. She informed us that I would be very sleepy for most likely the rest of the day. We still had 5 miles until we reached our destination. Ian offered to stay at camp with me so Kale and Cameron could take the trail the rest of the way to enjoy a bit of Kalalau beach since he had already been there a couple of times. Still, though I was in an anesthetized state, I refused to stay behind. I hadn't gone more than halfway in just to stay here another second; I needed to see that beach, there had to be a good reason people worked so hard to get to Kalalau. I thought, I'll be damned if I'm going to have to live without hearing the end of the fact that I held everyone back from seeing such a spectacular sight. I forced myself to sleepily grab my pack and truck on. I don't remember much of that last five miles in, but I do recall a few bits and pieces, like the sign we passed before the most terrifying point of the hike. It read: "DANGER. HAZARDOUS TRIAL CONDITIONS DO NOT GO BEYOND THIS POINT. A SLIP CAN MEAN DEATH. State of Hawaii."

The air felt so thick as I took it into my lungs, with dewy mist coating my respiratory system, and my mind in a sedated state, I wearily walked along the trail. The sun was scorching, and I felt as if my skin would dry up into a shriveled, confused mess. The ocean's waves were crashing below, six hundred feet down, past the cliff. A walking trail lay ahead, ranging from a few feet wide to merely inches from a slip and certain death. A strong gust of wind could send you barreling into the long trip down the mountainside, limbs limply flailing in panic, fingers frantically snatching at the air as flocks of sand and loosened rocks follow closely to your demise. Surely, there would be a loud series of cracks, snaps, and crunches as your limbs met rage fully with roots and boulders protruding through the earth on the steep ride down, doing mutant forms of cartwheels, flips, somersaults, and barrel rolls. How lovely it would be to join those crashing waves of the blue-green, coral-filled ocean.

"BABY! I said hug the mountain!" Kale shouted up at me. My eyes peered onto rocks, roots, limbs, and clumps of tough Hawaiian grass, perfect for grasping, spread sparingly and strategically along the rounded northern peak, and the steeper it got up to the top, the more

luscious the mountain's vegetation became. Even the clouds couldn't fly higher. Up, up, and farther up these gargantuan mounds had grown, reaching heaven and then setting their goals higher. Who can tell how far they go, past the swirly white clouds, disappearing into the soft blue sky, which resembled the intensity of the ocean below.

We rounded the last corner and headed down a four-hundred-foot steep slope lined almost intentionally like stairs by tree roots protruding from the mauve brown colored earth. As the ground started to become more flat than steep, we approached a sign reading first in Hawaiian, followed by the English translation.

"KALALAU: THIS IS SACRED LAND. GIVE IT YOUR UTMOST CARE & RESPECT. LEAVE KNOWING THAT YOU HAVE PRESERVED IT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS."

Finally, we were there, staring up a giant waterfall, the waterfall from the opening scene of the well-known movie Jurassic Park, gushing purified drinking water from its mouth down to the bottom, where a minor sum of people, who shared this surreal, oasis-like, secluded beach, gathered to fill their water jugs and enjoy a nice shower. Each of us enjoyed a blissful cleansing in its flawless drenches, before heading out to what seemed to be our own private beach, filled with the whitest sand my eyes had ever gazed upon. We only had a few hours to enjoy this magical setting until night struck. So we crammed as much as we could into the small amount of time we had. We quickly walked the shoreline, jumping into the ocean's waves as they crashed on the seemingly deserted beach. It felt as if this place was here just for us at that moment, as we skipped and frolicked like children racing from a relaxing session in the wet caves, filled with white sand with the tiniest sparkles of black sand. Waterfalls, wide open beaches, wet caves, and wondrously interesting mountain people, telling tales of their lives on and around this beach.

Before we knew it, we were in bed, tucked out from the long, demanding day, waking after an only semi refreshing night's sleep. My back in pain again, I made my way to the old, poorly managed outhouses down the way from our camp. I was still so tired, and I felt so beaten down. My face must have screamed it. Along my way, a Hawaiian man stopped me and sang his pity for me, telling me to stop by his place on my way back for a bite to eat. I did so, and the man handed me one big loaf of sweet Hawaiian homemade bread. He told me he had a boat and normally charged a hundred dollars a head to sail a person back out, but offered me a free ride out after hearing my story. I nodded and took a nibble of the bread to keep from appearing rude, quickly excused myself, and headed back for camp. I saved the bread to share with my starving crew, and I explained the whole thing to the boys. Kale agreed. With the lack of food for all of us and the pain in my back still lingering, it was best if we both rode back out. It all happened so fast, we were packing up our packs yet again, and rushing to the beach to catch Alikai before he set back for Hanalei, the head of the trail. We threw our hiking packs into giant black garbage bags, stuffing our pockets with precious Kalalau sand, and posing for two quick pictures on the beach in front of the waterfall. The boat sat in the middle of the ocean, and we had to swim out, fighting against the waves the whole way. Alikai ordered one of his men to swim me out on his surfboard. "I promised this girl I'd get her back safely," he said.

We made it into the boat after a few forceful waves, silently and somberly saying our goodbyes

to the magical beach. We had to swim from the boat when we got to shore yet again, but this time, fighting no waves. It felt as if the ocean was trying to keep us from leaving, and now that we were back to the beginning of the trail, the waves gave up their fight. We walked back to the parking lot and bathrooms at Hanalei Beach. An interesting-looking young man with tattoos on his face, one of the most memorable being a third eye on his temple, made a joke about our packs, still in garbage bags, resembling dead bodies. "You two just come back with Alikai from Kalalau?" he asked. We nodded. "Did you guys happen to see my wife on the trail? Her name is Rebecca." Our eyes grew wide as we enjoyed a long conversation with the spirited young man named Magic. He ended up giving us a ride back into town, as we had no way back and no cell phones with service to call anyone. He bought us a meal and treated us as if we were family as we rode with him and the 3-year-old son he shared with Rebecca. He commended me on my bravery to Kalalau, explaining to us that most locals have never seen the legendary beach. He also informed us of how proud we should have been to say we had made it there. He told us the Kalalau trail was 8 out of 10 on the scale of difficulty in the world's hiking trails, one of the most dangerous, with 80 people who've gone missing and 5 bodies recovered from the trail a year. "You've been on one hike before, and you survived Kalalau?! You should be proud." He told me. We said our goodbyes and exchanged information, as Magic assured us that hitchhiking in Kauai is an easy and common right of passage on the small island. He stopped to give me one last thing, honoring me with a gift for my success to Kalalau. He handed me a necklace made entirely of the tiniest seashells I had ever seen. Later, we were informed that this necklace was no ordinary piece of beauty; it was made of Ni'ihau shells, rare and only found on the neighboring secret island of Ni'ihau, where only true Hawaiian descendants live, and no one is allowed to visit. This necklace was worth over two hundred dollars and was made of the only shell that can be insured.

I was floored when I learned this, and I felt so undeserving of it. Yes, I had made it to Kalalau, but I had taken the easy way out, the free ride, and in the end, I was rewarded? I still long to go back, and plan on finishing what I started. Maybe then I will feel deserving of any of the beauty that followed that incredible journey. Maybe.