Accounting by Gina Wohldorf

**On their seventh day** in Hawaii, Carolyn listened to the tour guide describe a scorched black vista as beautiful. Carolyn nodded, shading her glasses, taking in the dead sticks that once were trees. “It reminds me of pictures of World War One,” she whispered to her husband. Trev laughed through crooked teeth and went on ahead, down a slanted path that ended in a deep black crateforty feet below them.

“Magma,” said the tour guide—a tall twenty-something Hawaiian with hair down to his navel and a camo green tank top worn so thin it was practically translucent—“is molten rock that’s still in the ground. It isn’t called lava until it comes to the surface.”

Carolyn nodded again. She told herself she must pretend to find this interesting. After a week on Kauai—lush leaves and long hikes to isolated waterfalls, the kids cliff-diving without her permission; the kids eating guavas that fell from high in the trees, as if there were no chance they could be poisonous—she felt a heavy relief at the tour guide with his long hippie hair and the burnt cliffs not even dumb kids would want to jump off.

“Should I,” the guide said, as Trev’s departure had dwindled the audience to two, “should I, uh, continue?”

“Yes,” Carolyn said. “I paid for it and I’ll listen to it, hon. So will Bonnie here.” Carolyn patted her sister’s huge rump affectionately, and Bonnie left a daydream that probably involved the tour guide on a romance novel cover.

“Great, well. As you probably know, Hawaii is itself one long chain of volcanoes—”

Carolyn did not know that. She wanted to say, “Hon, I don’t have a whole lot of time to watch the nature channel. I’ve been busy raising my kids.”

The topography looked like God had taken a flat black thumbtack and pushed it right into the middle of these serrated mountains and sparse jungle. Her family was a scatter beside a steaming hole in the crater’s center, venturing to within a few feet away, wanting to peer down into it. Evie, alone, was off to the side, touching one of the dead trees.

Carolyn interrupted. “Sorry, but are those hole jobbies dangerous? Those ones down there. The kids are sticking their faces in the smoke, see?”

The tour guide smiled at her indulgently, not unlike the way Carolyn’s husband had when she’d mentioned the war. Carolyn didn’t like it when people found her ignorance charming.

The guide said, “Why don’t we join them?” He started a new string of facts, his able feet picking down the path in impractical rubber flip-flops. Carolyn was wearing hiking sandals. She prided herself on her pragmatism. She worked part-time as a receptionist in a dermatology clinic. Trev was a civil engineer. They made good money, not great money, but Carolyn could take good money and make great things out of it. They could, and had, sent Kristine to college without need of a single loan and were now footing the bill for her master’s in counseling. Carolyn looked for Kristine and found her by what the tour guide was calling a geyser, even though no water was shooting out of it. Kristine was a safe distance away from the steam.

Morris was not.

“Sorry again,” Carolyn said, “but you’re sure, you’re sure my boy isn’t—”

“How old is he?” said the guide, charmed. “Eighteen? Nineteen?”

Carolyn felt her chest puff. “He’s seventeen.”

Carolyn and Trev could, and would, send Morris to college too, and whatever postgrad work he wanted to do after that. Morris was smart, like Trev, and was also good-natured like him. Carolyn worried about this.

Carolyn and Trev could, and did, listen to Morris’s plea to let Evie come, that he got to bring a friend along every vacation, and what was different about Christmas in Hawaii, and Evie’s parents just split up and she’s losing it, this’ll be her first big holiday with them divorced, she was busy at college for Thanksgiving, but now she won’t have studying to distract her, I’m her best friend, guys, please, she has to come with us or I’ll be worrying about her the whole time.

Trev had said, “We can afford to bring her along.” This was five months ago; they’d been in bed and could hear Morris banging around in the kitchen, making a midnight snack, a habit he knew Carolyn hated—bad for the digestion.

Carolyn had said, “I did the math. It’s a stretch.”

“No, Care, it’s not. You don’t like Evie. You never have.”

Which meant Carolyn could not, and did not, resist any further the inevitability of Evie’s coming along. Carolyn did not—did *not*—dislike her. Carolyn confirmed this by staring at Evie the whole way down the trail (when she wasn’t checking to see if Morris had burned his face off), and when she added up the trim legs and tiny waist and thin neck and oblong facial features printed on so-so skin, the sensation that repeatedly came over her, the sum Carolyn arrived at—as she might when penciling out a vacation budget in a steno notebook and deciding the helicopter ride cost too much—was: dangerous. The girl was dangerous. Carolyn had known it since Morris and Evie had raked leaves together after school one cool October day, Morris all of seven and a half, Evie nine. Carolyn had wondered then: What the H are you doing with my son? Why the H can’t you find friends your own age?

It wasn’t dislike, it was pragmatism. Why the H are you standing there looking at a dead tree, Evie, when my son begged us to bring you to Hawaii?

Carolyn steadied Bonnie at the crater’s outer rim. Though the crater floor was perfectly flat it looked porous to Carolyn, as if it could dissolve any second. Along with Trev, Kristine, and Morris were Uncle Werth and three kids—a tattooed delinquent who’d be lucky to get an auto-body job in adulthood, and two grade-schoolers so artfully named it embarrassed Carolyn to address them—as well as Grandma and Grandpa. But they were all fixtures, permanent and inalienable. They were family, and Evie—who’d moved even farther away now, to a distant shrub with purple berries—was not.

“Let’s get a picture,” Trev said, preventing the tour guide from spouting another stream of volcano trivia. “Everybody pretend this hole’s the volcano and it’s erupting. Like you’re running from it—an action shot!” He handed Carolyn the camera and rushed to position, both arms and one leg cocked at right angles, his face freezing in a rictus of panic. The family laughed and mimicked him, putting their own spins on it—Grandpa miming a walker he didn’t have and didn’t need, Uncle Werth picking up Bonnie in a fireman’s carry as she squealed with delight.

“Hang on!” said Morris, and ran to Evie as the family continued to ham. Carolyn took shot after shot, though the first one was best, with Morris actually running, actually panicked, thinking Evie needed to be in the picture. By the time he dragged her over, Carolyn had snapped a dozen, and Uncle Werth needed to put Bonnie down before his back went. Kristine was laughing and giving her dad a soft punch on the arm. Evie smiled at Morris, shrugged, and went to the tour guide. She asked him a question, pointing at the shrub with the berries. He nodded. She popped a handful of purple pearls in her mouth and chewed. Behind her back, Morris rolled his eyes. Carolyn’s chest did a happy cartwheel.

**Four days ago,** Christmas Eve, they’d gathered in their rented condo’s living room and watched a celebrity special on TV. They snacked on crackers and cheese and threw food at the screen when Jessica Simpson butchered “O Holy Night.” Evie, meanwhile, sat outside on the lanai with a paperback horror novel, reading by lamplight’s bleed through the screen door. Kristine leaned over to Morris on the couch. “What’s her problem?” she muttered, nodding at Evie’s shadow through the curtain.

Carolyn feigned disinterest as Morris said, “Evie’s family does all their stuff on Christmas Eve, so I guess she’s depressed.” Sympathy, but a dash of impatience.

Trev said, “Maybe you should go talk to her.”

“She says she’s fine, Dad.”

“Morris. Go talk to her.”

Morris said, “Khugh,” as teenagers do when parents don’t get it.

Carolyn got it. How impractical it was to be sad on a free trip to Hawaii, how ungrateful and passive-aggressive and downright effing wrong to pout on the deck because the Christmas celebration going on inside wasn’t the one you were used to.

So when Trev got up to make popcorn, Carolyn said, voice low, “What does her family do on Christmas Eve? We could play a game. Or open a present, instead of doing them all tomorrow morning.”

Morris shrugged. “She didn’t tell me what they do.”

Carolyn let a silence stretch and wrinkled her brow when Morris looked at her.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing,” Carolyn said. “Nothing, it’s just—how are we supposed to accommodate her if she won’t tell us how?”

Morris shrugged again. “I think she doesn’t want to, like, inconvenience us.”

Carolyn nodded at the lanai in an offhanded, tolerant way. Morris looked where Carolyn did, and frowned. Evie turned a page, curled up in her bad posture.

**Now, as the family journeyed** up the corkscrewing trail from the crater toward the far end of Volcano National Park, where the guidebook in Carolyn’s hands said there was a viewing platform from which visitors could observe an active volcano, Carolyn saw Evie hurrying closer to Morris, talking to him, faking a smile. Morris didn’t look at her; he kept walking.

Bonnie, still beside Carolyn, clicked her tongue. “Too damn skinny.”

“Eating disorder,” Carolyn said. “I’d bet anything. Look at her back in that bikini top. Those shoulder blades? They’re sharp as my garden trowel.”

Bonnie laughed. “Her parents divorced, right? They were your neighbors?”

“Four houses down. I guess the mom was cheating or the dad was cheating. Or they both were cheating. Don’t ask me.”

Bonnie’s elbow dug into Carolyn’s side. “No wonder she’s been such a brat the whole time.”

“Don’t be cruel.” Carolyn and Bonnie were big Elvis fans. They laughed.

Trev was doubling back from the top of the rise, approaching Carolyn and Bonnie. He’d turned away from their destination, which Carolyn could barely see—a wooden railing the length of a long speedboat, a change in the ground’s charred black color that meant either sand or sand-colored wood. She didn’t see the volcano yet and felt a keen, scared hope that it was so distant not even a pricey camera could zoom in close enough to appreciate it.

Trev arrived, took Carolyn’s hand, and said under his breath, “The acoustics here are tricky. We could hear you.”

Carolyn was about to ask what the H that mattered, but Trev nodded at the front of their procession, where Evie was speeding up, leaving the others behind, her head low in fear or shame or anger or a combination of all three.

Carolyn felt her eyes go wide as she hissed, “You think she heard me?”

“I think you owe her a big fat apology, Care.” Trev held her hand the whole way up the trail. It was time for Hawaii’s daily wash of warm rain, and Carolyn figured he didn’t want her to fall. The sky darkened and the air changed in seconds, a soft mist becoming a torrent that slicked the muddy rock they walked on.

“I told you we shouldn’t have brought her,” Carolyn said, quietly, though the pelting of raindrops must have canceled out the trick acoustics. “I told you, I’ve told you a hundred times, she’s bad for him.”

Trev shook his head. “She’s Morris’s best friend. She’s been his best friend for years. And she’s not a drinker, doesn’t smoke, no drugs, no sleazy boyfriends—unlike Kristine and those dickheads she dated, remember?”

“Are you defending Evie or Evie’s tits?” Carolyn spat out, and regretted it.

Trev said nothing else. He looked straight ahead and helped Carolyn up the trail until it topped flat and the rain quit. Then he let go and hurried to join the others.

Carolyn stayed where he’d left her. The rock was still moist. She’d wait for it to dry so she didn’t slip. If only he’d helped her onto the wooden slats, about another fifty feet, where Evie was at the railing already, the rest of the family coming in a crowd, Morris with his sister and cousins and aunt and uncle and grandparents. The observation platform looked like a deck on the back of a midwestern house—flush wooden boards lightly stained, jutting over great fists of hard lava, the rough kind, not pahoehoe but the other one. Jagged dark cliffs in the distance, as far as they could see, the only other thing to look at being the Pacific’s angry blue-white tantrum, like old-fashioned china endlessly being thrown at a dining room wall. Evie went all the way to the railing. She was getting sprayed by the breakers. The family stayed farther in, where they’d remain dry. But they were wet anyway, from the rain.

She put her hands out like a tightrope walker and eventually got to the platform; the long boards looked even slicker than the stone. She felt her feet going out from underneath her, panicked, slipped and slalomed in any direction that let her keep her balance. She had a second, maybe two, to work her way from embarrassment to an almost druglike euphoria at how sorry Trev would be when she fell on her face. She let out a caw. Just as the wet wood zoomed up to meet her, Carolyn froze, her body aching, piked. Her left arm was bruising in a firm grip. Carolyn shook her head at Evie’s toes, painted emerald green and splashed with black mud. Trev said, far away, “You okay, hon?” Evie held on tight—wordless, expressionless—as Carolyn straightened and followed her to the railing, where they let go of each other and faced the view like nothing had happened.

Great things with good money. To find a hot tub on clearance. To hear about a movie theater shutting down, contacting the manager, saying what are you planning to do with your popcorn machine, offering a hundred dollars. To rip up and replace the carpet yourself. To buy off-brand groceries. To save, and save, and save, and save, and once a year take a vacation somewhere rich, and do it the poor man’s way. To do great things for great kids, a mother had to put herself second.

But Evie’s mother bought a convertible after totaling the not-yet-paid-for minivan. And Evie’s mother bought mauve leather furniture—full price!—when the white sectional was still in good shape. And Evie was five foot ten, a hundred pounds and change, wearing cutoffs that could be called hangoffs for what they did on her hips, a bikini top that showed the matchsticks of her arms, and a head of hair once thick and lionesque that was now mangy thin from malnourishment. She was nineteen, looked sixteen, and was looking at the distant volcano like a sixty-year-old might—a sight reflective of the too much she’d already seen.

Carolyn couldn’t apologize to this sad girl whom her son had at last begun to understand was dangerous. Evie would drag him down, demand he be sad with her. Evie would take him far away, so she could be far away from her own broken family.

Morris was discovering the brutal practicalities of what friendship meant, and what family meant, and how they were different, and how the woman you decided to bring into your family must fit with that family. And Evie didn’t. Carolyn looked at the volcano, a thousand yards from where she stood, its spit of orange and the neon snake that slithered down the mountainside languidly before flicking its tongue into the Pacific.

Evie spoke. “I’m going to do all of those.” She sounded like the ocean underneath them, a violent hush. “Volcanoes, hurricanes. Earthquakes.” She smiled, but not at Carolyn—at the hot, deadly lava. “I’m going to do every single one.”

“What do you mean ‘do’ them?” Carolyn said.

Evie blinked, snapped out of it. She licked her lips, tasted salt, and grimaced. Carolyn thought of how hungry the girl must be. “I mean see them,” Evie said, then shook her head. “No, I mean survive them, I guess.”

Perfect example. Perfect example: the girl was insane. Hard not to find it a tad endearing, though, the nerve. Carolyn grinned. “What about tsunamis?”

Evie looked at the ocean, its guttural churn under the platform, and raised her eyebrows. Then she smiled at Carolyn wanly, before looking at the volcano again. “Maybe I’ll skip tsunamis.”

Carolyn thought the words: We’re so glad to have you here, Evie. I’m sorry about your mom and dad. I’m sorry, but you need to buck up, you need to not be a GD wet blanket. I’m sorry, but I could see when you were all of nine that you’d end up saying stuff like that—stuff about wanting to survive earthquakes and hurricanes—and you’re not taking my boy with you. He’s going to be a pragmatic, grown-up man.

Carolyn mouthed the words: *We’re so glad to have you here, Evie.* Because the ocean was loud where they were standing, and her family was walking away, and she saw Trev look back.

Carolyn mouthed: *I’m sorry about your mom and dad.*

Trev smiled, thinking his Care had really said it. He turned and mussed Morris’s hair.

Evie murmured over Carolyn’s silent apology, “I’m going to survive every single one.”

**Their first morning** in Hawaii, Carolyn had woken up at six. She tried to always be the first awake, just to make sure everything was on the up and up. As she crowded the breakfast bar with cereal boxes and milk, she found a note on the kitchen counter.

“On beach. Watching sunrise. Evie.”

Carolyn considered this rude and dangerous and stupid and spiteful. They found Evie right where she said she’d be—and Trev tried to excuse her with that: “She’s right where the note said, Care”—but Carolyn was responsible for Evie here. What would Evie’s parents say if she were abducted, hit by a car, drowned in a freak burst of the tide?

**Now, on the lanai,** freshly showered after returning from Volcano National Park, Carolyn thought that Evie’s parents might very well have not said much. The mother an ethereal beauty who gave off waves of desperate anxiety, the father a bearded former giant who seemed to be curling in on himself: they’d been popular in the neighborhood when they’d first moved in, but an odd insularity had infected them afterward. Had infected all of them, really. All the families had moved in at about the same time, and they’d had block parties and dinner parties and gone to each other’s rummage sales. Then that Midwest reticence took over. Cold winters in which this one or that one didn’t shovel quickly enough, hot summers in which this one or that one watered too much. Carolyn remembered another tour guide, the one on the whale watch yesterday, who’d said dolphins lived in groups, but small groups. They didn’t operate in large communities like insects—bees and ants, for example. And Carolyn had looked at Evie, lying on a boat seat, being seasick all by herself.

Carolyn now looked at Evie, whose turn it was in the shuffleboard game that she and Morris and Kristine were playing twenty feet below where Carolyn sat. Evie bent to a small flower, picked it from the grass, chewed it.

“Hey,” Morris said. “Are you playing, or not?”

“Yeah, sure.” Evie stood up, became dizzy, and bent her legs again. “Gimme a second.”

“You okay?” said Kristine.

“She’s fine,” Morris said. “She’s told me so a hundred times. Haven’t you.”

Evie swallowed the flower. “Yeah.”

Kristine mumbled “soda” and went away.

Evie got up, wobbling. She seemed to will herself steady, and halfheartedly paddled her disk to another point on the board. Morris shook his head at her.

“What,” Evie said, sounding hollow.

“Nothing,” said Morris, lining up his shot. “I’m really excited about Waikiki Beach tonight. Aren’t you excited?”

Evie nodded.

“Aren’t you? Aren’t you pumped? God, Evie, I can so tell.”

Evie looked levelly at Morris. “I’m trying,” she said. She sounded exhausted, but there was something deep down in her voice. Some awful, enduring fire. The ocean crashed behind Evie, and Carolyn was glad of it, in case the girl flamed alight.

“You’re trying,” Morris said derisively, and Carolyn almost said, “No, honey. Don’t do that.”

Evie said, “I didn’t ask you to bring me here.”

“Oh. I am so sorry I brought you to—”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying I am a mess. I am an enormous mess, and you are on vacation, and you do not want to hear what an enormous mess I am, so I will say I’m fine. I’ll say it till you ask me for real. Go ahead, Morris, ask me. Ask how I am.”

Morris threw his shuffleboard paddle to the concrete, where it clattered. “God, Evie! I don’t know what to do here. I don’t know, okay?”

Carolyn almost said, “She just told you, hon. She just told you what to do.”

“Okay,” Evie said, turning to nod at the sea. Morris left, stomping for the tide pools where his cousins poked at guppies. “Okay.”

**You had to focus** on the positive, Carolyn decided, sitting in the passenger seat of one of the three rental cars she got in a package deal. Practicality was a quiet joy, a subdued victory, but it meant Kristine would find a mate and have babies and a career, and Morris would do the same. It meant Trev would never leave, because he was intelligent and good-natured and he needed the complement of Carolyn’s bright voice telling the silent car, “We’re here!” Just as Morris had needed to learn that a focus on the positive sometimes means you have to leave hurting friends to their pain.

They parked in a lot crowded with rentals, a spot of asphalt topping a high hill. Waikiki was down a set of two dozen stairs to their left, the hotels lining the shore like square-cut jewels. The clips of seat belts sounded like snapping clams. They’d gone to a luau, day five, and there’d been clams on the buffet. Grown-ups got mai tais and kids got fruit punch, but one of the waiters thought Evie was hot and gave her mai tais. She got drunk. She laughed too loudly at unfunny things. Morris was embarrassed. “Prime example, exhibit A,” Carolyn had told Trev that same night, and she heard him faking a snore.

Carolyn got out of the car and waited for Trev so they could walk the beach hand in hand. Kristine and Morris were already bolting down the stairs, leaping the last few into the sand. “Careful, guys!” Carolyn screamed, the sound so loud in her ears she almost missed a word uttered breathlessly beside her.

“Wow,” said Evie.

Her face was the portrait of crying, without the crying. Red, contorted, eyes glassy. She was looking at the horizon, where the sun had begun to sink, a circle so vivid and close you’d swear you could pick it like a pomegranate. Sailboats drifted in the last exhales of day. The water was purple-red, the sand a smorgasbord of bright towels and tan bodies. There was a crop of rocks where old men and young children bent over fishing poles. The smell of age—of death and of life. A thousand thousand noises—screams, shouts, laughter, an infant crying—their frenetic barrage so multifaceted that it sang a soothing harmony to the water.

But it was the air Evie meant. Carolyn knew it, suddenly, as if she’d wandered into Evie’s thoughts by accident. The air had turned gold. It burnished everything it touched. Evie was holding her arm out, watching it turn gold, and she was thinking she wished her own family were here to see this. And Evie was remembering she didn’t have one, not anymore.

“Evie,” Trev said. “Evie, honey, are you all right?”

Evie looked at him, seemed ready to say something. Then at Carolyn. Carolyn took Trev’s hand and gripped it.

“I’m fine,” Evie told him, sniffing into her T-shirt. “I’m fine, it’s just really beautiful.” She hustled down the stairs, cutoffs joggling. She’d need a belt for those soon.

“What’s up with her?” said Bonnie, shutting the other rental’s door. Uncle Werth and their kids got out too. Grandma and Grandpa were parking the third car, taking their ponderous time.

“Nothing,” Carolyn said. “Let’s hurry, before it sets.”

There was only so much hurrying possible with Grandma and stairs, but the solid, comforting mass of Carolyn’s family all ended up on the sugary sand, unlacing their shoes, hearing cheers from volleyball games at the hotels’ guest nets. The tide was coming in, and no one walked the shoreline. So, naturally, Evie went to the water, the waves volatile, splashing her knees. Morris glanced at her, once, before he scampered up to a fisherman on the rocks and commenced a chat.

Carolyn felt satisfied with the gentle pressure of Trev’s hand around her own—it was there because he loved her for her ability to do these things, bring them beautiful places without breaking the bank, facilitate what was best for their son. Carolyn listened to Trev banter with Werth about what the fishermen probably caught out here. As they discussed it, they looked at Morris, at a man well made.

And since they were looking at Morris, since Morris was safe, Carolyn allowed herself a peek back at Evie, who’d stopped to face the ocean. From where Carolyn stood, the sun held Evie perfectly, the black cutout of her slight body all of a sudden seeming voluptuous, vital, deific. It was an abrupt vision—Evie encased that way. She should have appeared trapped, but she didn’t. Carolyn felt the easy comfort of Trev’s hand as if it were very distant, or as if he were a ghost, or she was. She felt certain one of them was dead. This was absurd. Carolyn berated herself that her panic was absurd. They were safe. She’d made sure.

Carolyn imagined the ocean rising in a gargantuan wall of water, one that would crash into this beach, wash over this island, leveling all of it. She would run for Morris and Kristine—or maybe she wouldn’t, maybe she would drop Trev’s hand and go. And she would feel the sea’s rage tear her to pieces, and she would see it tear her family to pieces. But Evie would only stand there and meet it, calm.

Carolyn could see it, as if it were happening, had already happened: the entire beach submerged, that volleyball net undulating underwater, those oiled housewives dead flotsam, this androgynous Asian child eating a popsicle on a Hello Kitty towel, twisted and broken by an unforgiving force.

“No northern pike,” Trev said, still laughing about fish. “Not here. Right, Care?”

Carolyn laughed mechanically. She saw Evie, shredded and drowned like all of them, piecing herself back together once the wave was finished. Evie collecting bits of skin—that had slashed into submerged flora, bone chips shattered against pitiless shale—and replacing them where they belonged, patting them until they stuck. Then she kicked for the surface and clung to a high-reaching tree, or used debris as a raft, or swam for a distant mountain, and she went looking for the next thing that would try to destroy her, and the next thing, and the thing after that.

Carolyn laughed, silencing the voice inside her that said she’d made a serious miscalculation