



Volume 10
Issue 1
2014

Yearning for the Farther Shore

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“I’m going to apply for a license to kill.” Stokes stood in the doorway gripping a bucket of rags. It was five-thirty and he had just finished cleaning his van.

“People won’t bring you their pets anymore for flea dips and sani-shaves.” Theresa didn’t look up from her magazine. Twelve years of living with Stokes and his various entrepreneurial schemes that all unravelled after outlays of two to ten thousand dollars had numbed her to any possibility he would ever pull off anything but “Honolulu Mobile Pet Groomers – Your Pet Will Be Stoked.” Inexplicably, she still loved him, much to the bewilderment of her friends, who whispered that Stokes must be really fantastic in bed for her to put up with him. He also kept her car gassed and serviced.

“Not pets,” he said. “People. I want to kill people.” The man was lanky and dark, not quite handsome, but had a shadowy deprived look that Theresa found intriguing.

“Shouldn’t you leave that to the *yakuza*?”

“We’ll beat the mob to it.” He was clearly excited, sprinting through his sentences. “The state legislature just legalized assisted suicide. Right?” He didn’t wait for affirmation, but plunged on. “The Dutch have been putting down the sick and elderly since 2002 and the Swiss since the forties. I guess their countries are so small they need to make room – like Hawaii. I read on the net that the Dutch just started these mobile euthanasia units. They come to your home and do it there.”

“Death makes house calls?”

“I like that. I’ll put it in my brochure.” He headed for the kitchen, still talking, the rags dripping on the tile floor. “Vets do it all the time. They come to your house so Fluffy’s not scared when he gets the goodbye-Fluffy shot.”

Theresa called after him, “Won’t you need some equipment?” The word *expensive* was implied.

“I’ve already got the van, a generator, sinks, a vacuum cleaner, all the sponges and rags.” He opened the refrigerator. “Course I’ll have to repaint the van.”

She heard ice clinking into a glass, money rushing from her checkbook, a diet Pepsi can popping. “Sponges and rags? How are you planning to kill them? With a sword?”

“Lethal injection.” He was back in the living room and flung himself into a chair. “Maybe a pillow? I don’t know. I’m sure there are guidelines.” He sipped his Pepsi. “Do you think it will be very messy?”

“You watch *CSI*. You tell me.”



Six months later, after completing the required courses and getting certified by the State of Hawaii as a euthanasia practitioner, Stokes launched Aloha Sundown Service. He had his van painted yellow, neither cheerful daffodil nor somber ochre but a discrete shade between the two, which he thought of as “whatevah yellow.” His logo, which Theresa commissioned as a gift, consisted of an orange line with a faded out half-sun resting on it. His ecru business cards bore the same logo. It was all very tasteful. Theresa was public relations director for a Waikiki hotel and made sure there were no tacky skulls or hemlock twigs in Stokes’ collateral material.

Sundown’s first client was Lucinda Ackerman, a centenarian and retired teacher in Lanikai. She had broken her pelvis, and it refused to mend, leaving her in constant pain. During the initial consultation, she told Stokes, “I’ve had my day on the stage, and now it’s time to bow out.”

Stokes arrived the morning after the mandated forty-eight hour waiting period. Lucinda’s daughter, Kim, had dressed her for the occasion in a shimmery bed jacket and a lei of fragrant pakalana. “Her favourite,” the daughter explained. The old woman’s hair was white and softly wavy.

“Are you ready, Lucinda?” Stokes asked in a professionally cheerful voice, as if he were proposing a morning in the solarium.

“I’m ready and willing—and you’re able.” Her smile was grim, her voice scratchy. Her daughter took her hand.

Stokes plugged in his equipment, which was modelled on the late Doctor Kevorkian’s Thanatron. It consisted of a trolley of three canisters, the first containing a saline solution; the second, sodium thiopental, a sleep-inducing barbiturate; and the third, a lethal mix of potassium chloride, to stop the heart, and pancuronium bromide, a muscle relaxant to prevent the patient from twitching and unnerving the witnesses.

Kim called her husband in from the yard. “Clyde, this is Stokes Halsey. I told you about him.”

Stokes put out his hand.

Clyde looked down at his own hands, which were dirty. “Sorry. I was digging in the yard.”

Stokes whispered urgently, “You realize, of course, that it’s against the law to bury your mother-in-law in the backyard.”

Kim rushed over to reassure him. “No, no. It’s all arranged with the funeral home.”

“I was just transplanting some heliconia,” Clyde said. He was clearly uncomfortable, bordering on hostile.

Stokes’ many failures had rendered him particularly sensitive to insult. “I see.” Clyde stayed in the doorway. Stokes, now cool and professional, slipped on his latex gloves, deftly inserted the intravenous feed into the back of Lucinda’s other hand and nodded.

Kim's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you, Mom. You are the best mother I could have hoped for, always there for me. I—"

"You can cry when I'm gone if you have to, but I want the last thing I see to be my child's smile. My suffering will soon be over. I've had a good life and I love you fiercely, but now my hand is stretched out in yearning for the farther shore." Lucinda looked to the doorway but Clyde had disappeared. She said to Stokes, "I'm ready to roll."

His hand was steady as he gave her the wire with the Stokatron Free Choice Switch.

Lucinda closed her eyes and without hesitation flipped the switch. A faint smile eased her face. Her breathing simply stopped. The whole process took two minutes.

Kim laid her head on her mother's breast and wept. "The *Aeneid*. My mother's last words were from the *Aeneid*. She was one of a kind."

Stokes discreetly waited to unhook the deceased. He didn't know what the *Aeneid* was, but had always associated "Ready to roll" with *Flight 93*. He said, "Those were brave words."

The daughter lifted her tear-streaked face to him. "I will always think of her with her hand stretched out in yearning for that farther shore." She composed herself. "I'm sorry. I thought I was ready."



As Stokes drove away, the sky had never seemed as blue, the trees as green, the mynahs so

belligerent, life so strong and dear. He finally understood the God myth; he felt like a powerful deity. This time he would make it big. He knew it with every fibre of his being.

When Theresa got home that night, he told her of his plans to buy a Mercedes hearse, to build an Aloha Sundown Centre, to go global. He had picked up brochures from the Lexus, BMW, and Mercedes dealerships and spread them out before her. "I want you to pick out a new car for yourself, test drive them all so you'll be ready to buy as soon as this thing takes off."

"That's nice, Stokes. Did you put on the rice?"

He had completely forgotten. "We're going out tonight. The pampering starts here."



The pampering seemed to end there, too, for business was slow, until Theresa came up with the idea of promoting Aloha Sundown Service through Hawaii's tourism bureau. "Why not?" she asked. "Tourism is Hawaii's number one business. It's a natural. I Googled and found out that death tourism is so big in Switzerland that the government's thinking of cracking down."

Stokes said, "If I had a Swiss euthanasia company, I'd call it 'Time's Up.'" He lifted his Pepsi glass in salute, then became serious. "This one, Theresa, this one's gonna work. I know it. Did you test drive the new Porsche yet?"

As usual, she feigned enthusiasm, cheering him on, although with ever more muted rah-rahs. She

went through the motions, setting up appointments for Stokes at the various travel desks in Waikiki and designing a website and colour brochure. She always put effort into his ventures, even if they were doomed.

According to the brochure, Aloha Sundown's services included, but were not limited to:

- Pre-event consultation (required by law)
- Fast-lane facilitation of state Department of Health requirements
- Choice of method
- Choice of site for event: home, beach, waterfall, chapel, golf course
- Personal shopper for event outfit, legacy gifts, etc.
- Grooming
- Photography
- Choice of floral bouquet or lei
- Music
- Spiritual invocation
- Catering
- All arrangements for "celebration of life" festivities, either pre- or post-event.
- Souvenir death certificate for next of kin, suitable for framing
- Disposition of the remains

The methods of deliverance, which were deemed too technical and perhaps a touch peccant for the brochure, were lethal injection with the Stokatron,

or the Sundown Hood, in which a plastic bag is placed over the head and helium gas administered.

Sundown's big break came when a travel writer for the *New York Times* interviewed Stokes. The story ran under the headline "Death Takes a Holiday." Inquiries and reservations suddenly materialized. Theresa quit her hotel job to work full time with Stokes, taking care of the event planning, shopping, public relations, and marketing, while he administered what they came to call "the exits."

"It's really not that different from wedding planning," Theresa said happily to her friends, vindicated finally in her taste in men. "Stokes said his clients reach out their hands in longing for the farther shore. Isn't he poetic?" Her friends smiled weakly until she took them out to the parking lot and showed them her new silver BMW.



Aloha Sundown Service cleared over a million dollars its first year in operation. Surprisingly, most of their clients were in their forties and fifties. "One would have thought it would be the elderly seeking death with dignity rather than ending up drooling in a nursing home," Theresa said.

Stokes didn't answer. He just sat there and stared straight ahead.

"Hello. Earth calling Stokes." She waved her hand in front of his face.

Recovering himself, he apologized.

"You weren't listening," she said.

“Yes I was. You said you were surprised most of our clients were younger.” He sat up, leaning toward her, his colouring florid. “The young do it because they have Parkinson’s or terminal cancer or had disfiguring surgery or have been in motorcycle accidents and are quadriplegic. They do it because they’re depressed about the state of the world or rising sea levels or they’ve lost a child, a spouse, even a beloved pet. Who really cares about the reason? All I need to know is: Stokatron or Hoodie?” He sank back in his chair.

She felt his forehead. It was hot. “Maybe you should cancel tomorrow’s exit.”

“An appointment with death is not like a dental appointment, Theresa. It’s much bigger, grandiose. People get all psyched up for it. And the Asatos came all the way from Japan. It’s my first Japanese exit. I can’t screw up.”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

“Thanks. I feel rotten. I think I’m getting the flu.”

“At least you don’t have to worry about giving it to clients. They’ll be dead before the first sneeze.”



The rented wedding/funeral chapel had a revolving three-way altar: Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish. Today, the golden Buddha waited in ponderous contemplation to determine which realm the soul’s accumulated karma had earned and to send that soul on its way to another human existence, an animal incarnation, one of the

labyrinthine torture chambers of Hell, the restless jealousies of Asura, the perpetual seeking of the Hungry Ghost, or one of the thirty-seven levels of Heaven.

The door opened and an old Japanese woman in *yukata* hobbled in on the arm of her son, who led her down the aisle to the foot of the Buddha, where a futon awaited her. Mrs. Asato, thin and bent with age or osteoporosis, did not look up when Stokes introduced Theresa. The old woman was the cliché image of Asian humility, first paying homage to the Buddha, adding a pinch of incense to the smouldering bowl, then letting her son ease her down to the futon.

Stokes wheeled the chosen Sundown Hood and helium equipment into place, plugged it in, and whispered to Theresa, “I have to sit down or I’ll pass out. You know what to do, right?”

“I think so.”

“You can’t think so, you have to know so.”

“Okay, okay. We practiced. I know what to do.”

“I’ll be right over there,” he said, retreating to a pew.

Kenji Asato approached. He was dressed in a dark business suit and walked with the rigid posture of an impatient man. “Is there a problem?” he asked in accented English.

“No, not at all,” Theresa said. “My partner isn’t feeling well. But we’ve done hundreds of these events. Is your mother ready?”

Without even glancing at his mother, Mr. Asato answered curtly, “*Hai*. Yes.”

As Theresa bent to tenderly fit the hood about the woman's head and neck, Mrs. Asato opened her eyes and tears streamed out. Her look was frightened and pleading.

Upset, Theresa turned to the son. "Are you sure she's ready?"

He knelt beside his mother and spoke to her in brusque, guttural Japanese.

The old woman shrank from him.

"Go ahead," he said to Theresa. "She's ready."

Theresa felt tears rise in her own eyes as she secured the Velcro around Mrs. Asato's neck and handed her the switch.

The woman held on to it for several seconds and then her ancient face hardened. She became the cobra about to strike, focused and lethal. In a sudden angry movement, as if killing someone else, not herself, she flipped the switch and the hood began to fill with helium. Mrs. Asato stared at her son with pure hatred and mouthed incomprehensible Japanese words in a Mickey Mouse helium voice. He knelt over her, never touching her, and smiled.

As soon as his mother's eyes closed, he got up and walked out, signalling the hearse attendants to come in and collect the body.

Theresa excused herself and ducked behind the altar in the shadow of a large menorah. She couldn't stop shaking. She was as cold as the deepest part of the ocean. She waited until the sounds of business and removal subsided and the chapel door closed.

“What happened to you?” Stokes demanded.
“I’m sick, and you left me to deal with this.”

“I have to go outside in the sun. I don’t feel good.”

He followed her. “You don’t feel good? I can hardly stand. I can’t even read the goddamn check. It could be made out to the Queen of England for all I know.”

She sat on the chapel steps in the sunlight and lifted her face to the breezes and warmth.

He thrust the check at her. “Here.” It was a traveller’s check.

“Sit down, Stokes. Grab some Vitamin D. It’s free.”

“So’s melanoma. I want to get home. I’m sick. Remember?”

In the car, Theresa said quietly as she drove, “That woman didn’t want to die, Stokes.”

“She flipped the switch herself, didn’t she? That’s all we have to worry about.”

“The son’s an eel. He probably wanted her money.”

“I can’t worry about family dynamics. I’m not a psychiatrist.” He pushed the passenger seat to its lowest recline and closed his eyes.

They drove the rest of the way home in electric silence.

Stokes was sick for days and they had another exit scheduled, a New York financier with terminal brain cancer. He was flying in with his wife, ten friends, and two servants in a private jet. As instructed, Theresa had set up two days of touring

and a lavish farewell dinner at the five-star Armand's on Waikiki Beach.

"If I still feel like this, you're going to have to handle this one on your own," Stokes said, bleary-eyed from his bed.

"I can't do it. Call the guy."

"Guys like that can't reschedule. They're busy."

"I bet he's got nothing on his calendar after Friday."

"These are big shots, Theresa. These dudes run the world." Stokes propped himself on his elbows. "If we do this one right, the sky's the limit."

"I'm done, Stokes."

He shouted, "Don't sabotage me. You never believed I'd be successful. Never. You patronized me all along. I'm not stupid."

"I'm not sabotaging you."

He continued his rant—"Poor loser Stokes"—then sank back on his pillow and changed his tone. "Help me out on this one, Theresa. It's a really big one. And I'll never ask you again."

Tears rolled down Theresa's cheeks. "I can't."

"Tell you what." He took her hands. "You do the airport welcome, the whale watching excursion, the visit to the palace, the big dinner, and I'll handle the exit. Hopefully, I'll be on my feet by Friday. Okay?"

She nodded.

"We'll take that cruise you always wanted. The Riviera, Greek Islands, Turkey. How's that?"

She nodded again, defeated.

He continued to hold her hand. "Think about the positive side, all the good we're doing, helping

people, easing pain and suffering. This is not a job. It's a calling."

"Really? Who's calling?"

"Well, nobody—we know that. I meant, it's like becoming a priest or a doctor—a god even. It's special."

That was a bit too much. She gently withdrew her hands and left the room. She sat down and turned on the television, but every show involved death or politics, so she turned it off and leafed through the Ross Simons catalogue.



Ira Weinfeld, the New York financier, was tall, skeletal, and bald, with Frankenstein scars in his scalp from surgeries that obviously hadn't worked. His eyes were the clearest, most enlightened blue Theresa had ever seen. They made her think that Ira Weinfeld already saw that farther shore and was ready to storm it. When he spoke, he boomed, as if he had decades of take-overs still in front of him.

His wife, probably his third or fourth, was at least twenty, maybe thirty years younger than him. Predictably blonde and named Chantel, she was surprisingly devoted to him. She carried his medicines in a large, bright yellow Dior handbag, along with a supply of immaculate, monogrammed white linen handkerchiefs, which Ira seemed to need in abundance. His eyes and nose ran almost constantly, yet he managed to make his dabbing and wiping look like an eccentric affectation.

Theresa assisted with the in-suite check-in, then returned to the lobby to phone Armand's and

go over the menu one final time. Ira Weinfeld had personally worked with the chef on his last supper: an appetizer of caviar from Aquitaine served with blini and potato, a salad of spring greens with truffle fraiche dressing, roasted duck breast with lavender honey on a bed of butternut squash, and a symphony of five desserts. Theresa then followed up with the tour reservations.

Since Ira Weinfeld was a yachtsman, his exit event involved a fleet of outrigger canoes plus a small catamaran equipped with the “Anchors Aweigh” maritime version of the Stokatron.

Just as Theresa was wrapping up her arrangements, she spotted Chantel rushing through the lobby with an already bulging shopping bag. She waved and Chantel hurried over.

“I can’t believe what I just paid for a straw hat.” Exhausted from spending her husband’s money, she plopped into a wicker chair opposite Theresa.

“That’s Hawaii,” Theresa said, bored with her.

“I don’t want Ira to get sunburned. Brain cancer’s bad enough without skin cancer.” She laughed at her own absurdity.

Theresa realized she had misjudged this wife, had pictured Chantel weeping theatrically in a floppy-brimmed, flowering ridiculousness that she had paid seven hundred dollars for in the lobby boutique. “That’s so thoughtful of you to rush out and get him a hat.”

“Really, I think a hat gives a man authority. I mean, look at the Pope.” She began to cry. “I don’t know how I’m going to get through this. He may

be ready, but I'm not. It's like everything is the last. The last plane ride, the last check-in, the last—it's just so, so hard."

Theresa leaned toward her. "You may not be ready, but Ira's hand is reaching out in yearning for the farther shore."

Chantel smiled through her tears. "That's so beautiful, but it isn't Ira. He wants to live, but he can't, so he's choosing to go while he's still himself." She shrugged. "Still in control." She dabbed at her eyes with one of Ira's hankies, leaving a mascara smudge on the linen. "Is that a poem, that yearning for the farther shore thing?"

"You haven't met Stokes yet. My partner. He said it. You'll meet him Friday."

"You'll be there, too, won't you?"

"Unfortunately, I have other arrangements that day."

"Please. Ira's friends hate me. They think I'm a bimbo because I didn't go to Harvard, and I have big breasts that I don't mind flaunting, thank you very much. They think I'm after Ira's money, but we really fell in love. I was his manicurist and we fell in love holding hands. Ira's a wonderful man. Please help me on Friday." When Theresa hesitated, Chantel pleaded, "We invited Ira's kids but they wouldn't even come to his death."

"Okay."



Theresa had booked the *Navatek* for whale watching because it had the smoothest ride, but it was the end of March and they saw only one

whale. At Iolani Palace, she got the little party there in time to watch the brief documentary about the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani. No matter how many times she saw it, Theresa cried. When she glanced at Ira Weinfeld, he was dabbing his eyes, but she couldn't be sure if it was emotion or brain cancer. Chantel leaned into him. Their affection for each other was so obvious, how could anyone hate her? Perhaps love was precisely why they hated her. Theresa realized with a sharp pain that while she might love Stokes, she didn't like him. His success had been too long in the making, and the seeds of her contempt were too firmly rooted.



The dinner at Armand's was superb. Ira tapped his wine glass with his fork and stood up. "We each have an allotted time on this Earth, and it flies by. Please remember me by doing at least one really good thing every twenty-four hours." He seemed so robust, so full of life as he raised his glass. "I want to thank everyone for making this final journey with me. Each of you is special to me and my beloved Chantel, and tomorrow I want only joy as you see me off, for death is the destiny of every man and the day of death is better than the day of birth." He raised his glass higher. "Ecclesiastes: 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.'"

Someone said, "Hear, hear," and they all sipped their French burgundy as Ira reclaimed his seat.

Chantel stood up and proposed a toast, “To the finest man I’ve ever met, Ira Weinfeld.” She leaned over and kissed his bald head. “And the sexiest.” She posed provocatively, displaying her incendiary décolletage.

The guests dutifully drank again, glancing at each other over the rims.

Chantel sat down, then popped up again. “And I’d like to thank Theresa here, from Aloha Sundown Service. Hasn’t she done a fantastic job?”

They all clapped decorously.

Theresa wished she were anywhere but in the house of mourning.



Friday dawned softly, with faint breezes rustling the palms. Theresa had gotten up early and picked a bagful of plumeria blossoms with which to blanket Ira Weinfeld’s body after his exit. Stokes said, “You don’t have to come, you know. I told you I’d be okay by today.”

“I promised Weinfeld’s wife I’d be there.”

“You can’t let yourself get emotionally involved with clients.” He shook his head in exasperation. “Stay home, read a book.”

“I promised I’d be there.”

“Suit yourself. But you’ll have to ride in one of the outriggers. There’s no room on the catamaran.”

She shrugged.

The fleet of outrigger canoes was beached on the sand in front of the hotel, with a contingent of

paddlers standing by. The small catamaran waited at the water's edge. The paddlers in surfer jams stood at attention as the funeral party arrived, Ira in his new straw hat leading the way.

Theresa had a list of who was to ride in which outrigger and who was going on the catamaran. She was to climb into the last outrigger to be shoved off from shore. When Chantel saw this, she yelled for Theresa. "Here, ride with us. Come. Please."

The catamaran was already afloat, and Theresa had to wade in. She had worn a muumuu and got wet to the waist, dripping on everyone as Chad, the helmsman, helped her climb aboard. She apologized for puddling while Stokes glared at her, his arms protectively around the Anchors Aweigh Stokatron.

The tradewinds picked up as they sailed toward Diamond Head. It was a glorious Hawaiian morning. Suddenly, in a gust of wind, Ira's hat blew off. It swirled in the air, scooted across the waves and settled in a trough. "Oh, no," Chantel cried. "Ira will get so burned. And that hat cost a fortune."

"Want me to come about?" the helmsman asked.

Gripping the mast, Ira stood up. "No need," and he dove in and swam for the hat while Chantel shrieked, "I can't swim. I can't swim. Someone help him."

Chad brought the catamaran into the wind and held it there. Theresa quickly pulled her muumuu over her head and jumped into the water in bra

and panties. She heard Chad shouting, “Whales. Whales at ten o’clock.” She looked over the waves and saw their dark, shining shapes undulating. It looked like two adults and a baby, and they were swimming straight for Ira, who was so intent on chasing his drifting hat that he didn’t see them.

The whales barely stirred the water in their approach, then began to circle Ira. “What the—” he yelled in panic, then began to laugh. When he looked back at the catamaran, his face glowed in ecstasy. The outriggers arrayed themselves on the waves at a respectable distance. Then, as quickly and quietly as they had come, the whales dove beneath the sea and were gone. Three paddlers rolled out of their canoes and swam for Ira and Theresa. The hat was nowhere in sight.

Once they had been helped back aboard the catamaran, Ira ordered, “Trim the sail and let’s catch some wind. Today is too beautiful to die.”

Stokes began to object until Theresa poked him. He growled in her ear, “No refunds, no discounts.”

Chantel had her arms around her husband. She had given him her big straw ridiculousness for shade. “I told you,” she said to Theresa. “Ira’s hand is not reaching out in yearning for the farther shore.”

Ira looked at her in delighted amazement. “I didn’t know you read the *Aeneid*.”

Chantel smiled sweetly. “I think the whales took your hat.”

As they sailed along the shore of Oahu, Ira said, “I wanted to assert some control over this damned disease, to have victory through death.

And I have to admit, I'm terrified of what I'm facing, dementia, pain, but today I've been surprised by joy, by absolute twenty-four karat rapture, so I've decided to ride each moment left to me. Whatever lies ahead—so be it.”

Stokes sat next to his deadly canisters, calibrating his costs, while Theresa's soul reached out in yearning for a shore on which Stokes did not stand. She opened the bag of plumerias and scattered the flowers to the wind.

Rita Ariyoshi's fiction has appeared in literary journals, consumer magazines, and been collected in anthologies. She is a winner of a Pushcart Prize, first place in the National Steinbeck Center short story competition, and first place in the University of Hawaii fiction contest. She has authored several books, including *National Geographic Traveler Hawaii*. She lives on a quiet lagoon in Hawaii Kai.