

Until Next Time: A Portrait of Honokaa

By Wailana Kalama

The delicate fly screen bangs on its hinges, startling the yellow parakeet in her cage just outside the fading teal door. In the deli kitchen, my co-worker Susan and I slide off our sloppily painted stools and smile. Mid-afternoon following the lunch rush, the little organic bistro known as *Simply Natural* is tranquil except for an irregular regular, like this coffee guy, his brown eyes shifting to the bottomless pot in the corner.

“One cup,” he murmurs in sing-song English.

“Free of charge,” I say cheerily, same as every day. Sniffing up the aromatic fumes in his trademark cup, he nods once and waddles back outside to his mates.

Honokaa is the epitome of a small town—voluptuous slopes and unstained beauty but tiny at ~2,000 people. Tourist maps would ignore it completely if it were not placed merely 8 miles from the emerald Waipi’o Valley, a main source for poi among the islands. But for me, it’s home, where I can connect with my cast of quirky friends. Here is the Hawaii I know—siestas, seclusion, and salt-threaded palms. In one spin in your sandals you can see the mountain and the ocean. The town consists of one street, extending from the Filipino dry goods store to the deserted police station, from the old theatre that stills runs on an ancient projector to a smattering of tourist shops, selling koa woodwork, sarongs, and island merchandise.

I have never known the names of the coffee guys; asking would break the tradition—five or so of them, retired and as gossipy as a throng of housewives, sit all day everyday on the stone bench just outside the shop. *Simply Natural* is the kind of place that would shut down in the middle of the afternoon to bake banana bread for a sick neighbor. This morning, like any other, the organic deli is scented with the succulent smell of taro-banana pancakes and spicy tuna melts for which

the shop is famous. Around 10 a.m. the bustle starts banging in, customers from everywhere famished as wild boars—pasty tourists, shirtless locals, millionaires, campers. Our mascot is my boss and the chef, Susan, a bright-eyed, chipped lightbulb of emotion, her childlike jokes flying in the air. She loves gossip and she loves people. Her day begins with “Aloha!” and ends with “A hui hou!” Until next time. It’s the Hawaiian spirit—welcome and take it slow. She laughs behind her tiny window, hollering at familiar faces and chatting with newcomers.

When the brunch rush is over, Susan runs to the refrigerator in the rear courtyard outside and pulls out vases of glossy anthuriums—table decorations. “This is the flower with which the Queen of Sheba tricked Solomon,” she tells me. Even though I doubt the existence of tropical flowers in the Arabian Peninsula, I begin to divide the red and white petals into violet glass vases.

Honokaa is a place of sleepy tranquility, where the days start late and end peacefully. Sometimes when it is slow like this afternoon, we put on the Beatles’ One album and play pyramid, a fast-moving card game, watching the occasional pickup truck whir by on the main road. Mamane St., named after a Hawaiian tree, stretches a few miles parallel to the ocean. By four, we are usually serving winded travelers and their children homemade ice cream. As they leave, licking up green tea flavors, Susan winks playfully at them and calls out, “A hui hou!”

