

The Little Grass Shack

Jeannette and I were riding a small ferry from Molokai to Maui to meet Dan and Linda Iles, friends for many years from Combie Bible Church in Lake of the Pines near Sacramento, California. Dan was our pastor and my backpacking buddy there for almost five years. They were scheduled to arrive in Maui on an early afternoon flight from San Francisco. To accompany them from Maui to our timeshare on Molokai, we had risen at five in the morning to catch the same boat the hotel and condo workers use to commute to Maui.

It was a gorgeous morning, skipping over the swells, seagulls crying for handouts, porpoises slicing through the bow wave, and shafts of sunlight peeking between puffy clouds in the early morning sky. Jeannette and I took turns posing for pictures of one another with the sunlit clouds in the background. Did I mention, it was a gorgeous morning?

When the ferry arrived in Lahaina, Maui it was only 7:30 a.m. and we had at least five hours to kill before the Iles' plane arrived. The only ferry between the two islands departed at 6 a.m. and returned at 6 p.m. We hadn't eaten yet but decided to rent a car for the day and find a restaurant on the beach somewhere north along the shore of Maui where the plush hotels are located.

One of the greatest pleasures in Hawaii is eating breakfast at one of the many outdoor buffets scattered among the beach resorts. A warm sea breeze bathes the diner through open windows with a view of waves, palm trees, and an occasional morning rainbow.

The breakfast is to die for! In addition to the conventional stacks of pancakes, waffles, sausage, eggs, and cereals, in Hawaii, fresh tropical fruits are displayed in abundance. Pineapples, papayas, mangoes, grapes, Coconuts, and bananas are sliced and laid out in attractive patterns. These are not the partially ripened fruit you purchase on the Mainland, but tree-ripened nectar from heaven. The pineapple and papaya can only be truly experienced in the Islands. And, if that isn't enough, tropical flowers are strewn in abundance over and around the overflowing trays of food and the aroma of fresh plumeria scents the air. It's truly a paradise!

Jeannette and I drove up the coast and found one of those breakfast buffets near a small cove where waves sloshed noisily on the shore just outside the pavilion where we ate. Beyond the cove, some ten miles away, was a view of the east end of Molokai with its distinctive rock formation. The beach nearby on Maui is where Rodney Yee filmed some of his yoga videos with Molokai in the background. Although Jeannette and I used to emulate some of his easier exercises, only our friends, Al and Lin McNab, still seem to be limber enough to continue doing poses such as "Downward Dog" or the "Warrior." I can't even climb to my feet now, once getting down on the floor!

The breakfast was so pleasant we dallied for nearly two hours over coffee before realizing we were running late. We returned to our rental car with intentions of driving completely around the northern portion of the Island and ending at the airport to meet the Iles.

When we picked up the rental car earlier, I had noticed a warning on the rental agreement not to drive the car on unmaintained highways, or any damage would not be covered by the insurance provided by the rental company. That strange clause shouldn't apply to our little excursion, I thought. After all, we were only going out for a three-hour cruise! They were probably just warning not to take the unmaintained road beyond Hana.

As we began our journey toward the northeastern side of Maui, we passed several fascinating sites. The first was the Ritz Carlton Hotel and Resort, a five-star hotel with a famous PGA golf course sloping off a volcano into the sea. The second was several miles of pineapple plantations containing large fruit ripe for the picking. The third was a sizable cliff overlooking a lagoon. The road ran along the edge of the cliff and was crowded with cars. Dozens of young Hawaiians were diving and swimming in the lagoon. And, the fourth was the official end of the road! The pavement turned to gravel and a sign announced that the highway ended here and rental cars were not permitted beyond this point.

This couldn't be! We had driven almost fifty miles to come to this impasse? What a disappointment. If we turned back now, we would probably be late getting to the airport. And, if the road went through, the distance to the airport would

probably be half of what it would be if we turned around. Besides, the road didn't look bad. It was gravel and appeared well cared for and was more than wide enough. "Let's drive on for a while and see how we do, " I said.

As we continued, the road began to climb and slowly turned south. We were apparently now on the eastern side of Maui heading toward the airport, which was also on the same side of the Island, according to the crude map we had. We began to get glimpses of the ocean off to our left and finally reached a vista that showed the ocean far below, maybe a thousand feet or more. What a magnificent view!

I noticed as we drove along this beautiful high mountain wilderness that a few dirt roads branched off to what appeared to be small, isolated ranches. Each time a side road exited, the main path became narrower and narrower. Finally, our road could no longer truly be called a road, but more like a path. We were driving on two dirt ruts with grass growing between them on each side.

I was getting worried. This could become dangerous! I had driven my family into scary situations like this before. In fact, I have a reputation in the family for getting stranded in the mountains of Colorado, the deserts of Nevada, and the backroads of Mexico. And, it appeared I had done it again.

The road now was so narrow I had no place to turn around. I might have to back up for miles to find a wide enough space in the road to turn around if things didn't improve soon. By now, if we could turn around, we would likely be hours late meeting Dan and Linda. We might even miss the return ferry to Molokai that evening. What if we ran out of gas or the car died? My mind began imagining all sorts of horrible scenarios. And, on top of all that, I was getting hungry.

About that time, when I thought things couldn't get any worse, our deer track edged along a rocky wall to the right and a narrow ledge with a huge drop-off to the ocean below on my left. Our small compact car could barely fit between them. The curve was so sharp I couldn't see around the corner to tell if anyone was coming from the other direction. We hadn't passed anyone for over an hour since seeing the kids swimming back at the end of the road. So, it seemed ludicrous, but I honked the horn to alert anyone who might come around the bend, that I was headed their way.

As the road straightened out again, we began to descend into a small valley on the other side of the narrow spot. The view that opened before us was pastoral. Great relief flooded my mind. Along the road below us lay a small Hawaiian village. It appeared we had taken a step back in time. Villagers dressed in traditional, colorful Hawaiian clothing were tending sugar cane, banana groves, and goats, chickens, and children. The road widened as we descended into the village and the grass turned to gravel. Children and old people stared at us as we tried to avoid running over chickens and children.

The road continued to widen as we reached the south edge of the tiny town and newer, more modern buildings began to appear. As I accelerated, heading out of town, I caught words on a hand-written sign from the corner of my eye. The sign said, "Banana Nut Bread for Sale." The release of tension from suddenly returning to the safety of "Civilization" and realizing I was starving was palpable. They combined causing me to jam on the brakes, back up, and stare at a heavy Hawaiian lady sitting in a little grass shack at the side of the road selling banana nut bread. She reminded me a little of, "Bloody Mary" in "South Pacific. "

Jeannette and I purchased the last loaf of banana nut bread the lady in the grass shack had and devoured it on the spot. While gobbling her bread, we also had the most incredible conversation. She asked how we happened to be traveling on the road through her village and where we were from. I responded, that we had ignored the prohibition to not drive on unmaintained roads and had become quite fearful about being able to complete the circuit around the north end of her island. And, we were just visiting Maui for the day to pick up our friends at the airport. We planned to return to Molokai on the six o'clock ferry.

She responded that she was from Molokai herself, but had married a man from Maui and moved to this small village. Jeannette and I had just see Dr. Palu, our dentist in San Diego, who was from Molokai. So, I asked her, "By any chance, do you happen to know Dr. Greg Palu? He told us just last month that he was from Molokai."

She responded, "Yes, he and I attended school together." I was astounded. It seemed incredible to me that we had just met two people in the last month who knew each other, yet lived two thousand miles apart, and had grown up together on

the same island some twenty years before. What are the odds of that happening? Somehow, the world seemed a much smaller place after that encounter.

We finally arrived at the airport about thirty minutes late. But, it could have been much worse. We could have decided to turn around at the narrow place just before reaching the village, by backing several miles up the road and taking the long way around. But, if we had, we would have been several hours late. And, more importantly, we would have missed the incredible banana nut bread and learning, "It's a small world, after all."