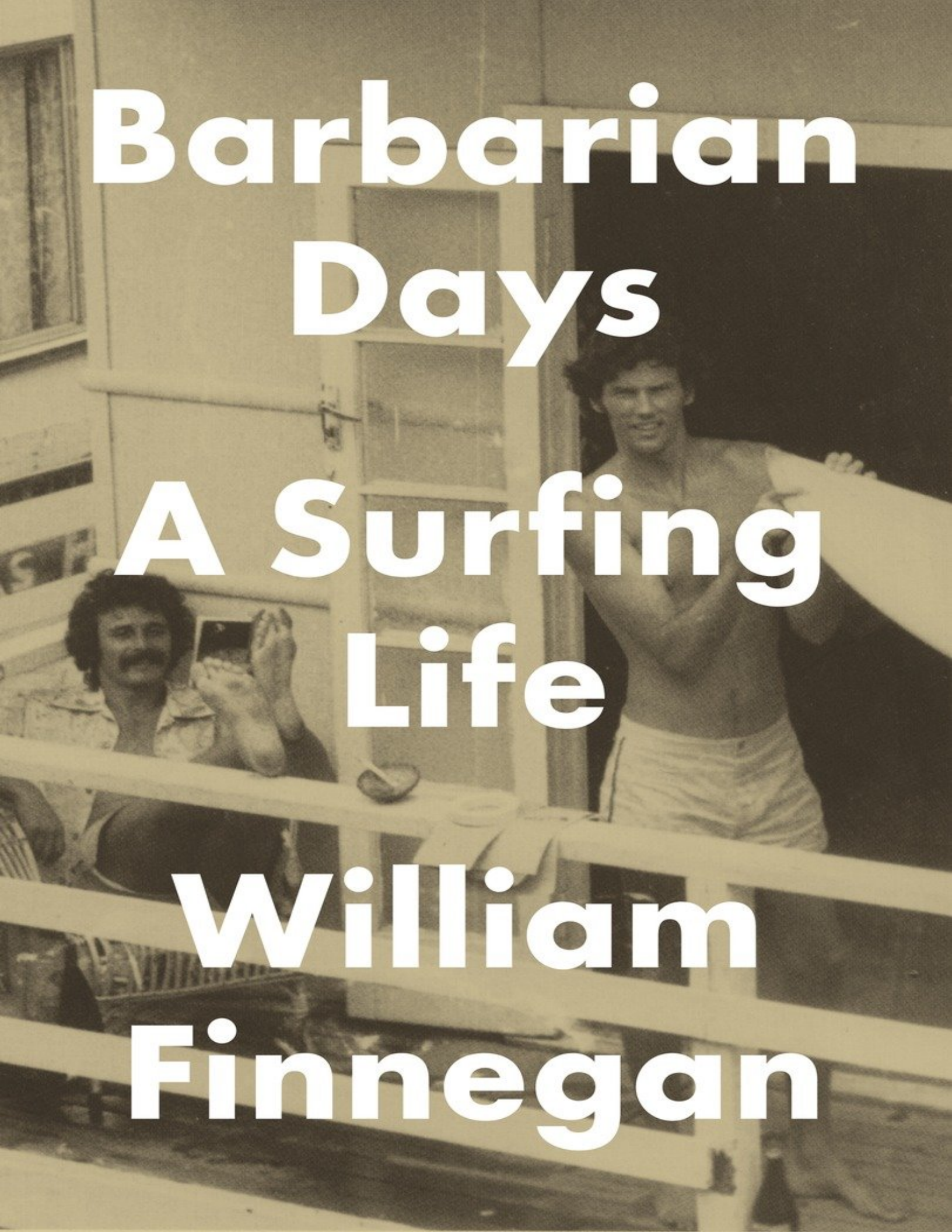

Barbarian Days

A Surfing Life

William Finnegan

Grajagan, Java, 1979

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A Surfing Life

WILLIAM FINNEGAN

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for Mollie

He had become so caught up in building sentences that he had almost forgotten the barbaric days when thinking was like a splash of colour landing on a page.

—EDWARD ST. AUBYN, *Mother's Milk*

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ONE

OFF DIAMOND HEAD

Honolulu, 1966–67

I HAD NEVER THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS A SHELTERED CHILD. STILL, Kaimuki Intermediate School was a shock. We had just moved to Honolulu, I was in the eighth grade, and most of my new schoolmates were "drug addicts, glue sniffers, and hoods"—or so I wrote to a friend back in Los Angeles. That wasn't true. What was true was that haoles (white people; I was one of them) were a tiny and unpopular minority at Kaimuki. The "natives," as I called them, seemed to dislike us particularly. This was unnerving because many of the Hawaiians were, for junior-high kids, alarmingly large, and the word was that they liked to fight. Orientals—again, my terminology—were the school's biggest ethnic group. In those first weeks I didn't distinguish between Japanese and Chinese and Korean kids—they were all Orientals to me. Nor did I note the existence of other important tribes, such as the Filipinos, the Samoans, or the Portuguese (not considered haole), let alone all the kids of mixed ethnic background. I probably even thought the big guy in wood shop who immediately took a sadistic interest in me was Hawaiian.

He wore shiny black shoes with long sharp toes, tight pants, and bright flowered shirts. His kinky hair was cut in a pompadour, and he looked like he had been shaving since birth. He rarely spoke, and then only in a pidgin unintelligible to me. He was some kind of junior mobster, clearly years behind his original class, just biding his time until he could drop out. His name was Freitas—I never heard a first name—but he didn't seem to be related to the Freitas clan, a vast family with a number of rambunctious boys

at Kaimuki Intermediate. The stiletto-toed Freitas studied me frankly for a few days, making me increasingly nervous, and then began to conduct little assaults on my self-possession, softly bumping my elbow, for example, while I concentrated over a saw cut on my half-built shoe-shine box.

I was too scared to say anything, and he never said a word to me. That seemed to be part of the fun. Then he settled on a crude but ingenious amusement to pass those periods when we had to sit in chairs in the classroom part of the shop. He would sit behind me and, whenever the teacher had his back turned, would hit me on the head with a two-by-four. *Bonk . . . bonk . . . bonk*, a nice steady rhythm, always with enough of a pause between blows to allow me brief hope that there might not be another. I couldn't understand why the teacher didn't hear all these unauthorized, resonating clonks. They were loud enough to attract the attention of our classmates, who seemed to find Freitas's little ritual fascinating. Inside my head the blows were, of course, bone-rattling explosions. Freitas used a fairly long board—five or six feet—and he never hit too hard, which allowed him to pound away to his heart's content without leaving marks, and to do it from a certain rarefied, even meditative distance, which added, I imagine, to the fascination of the performance.

I wonder if, had some other kid been targeted, I would have been as passive as my classmates were. Probably so. The teacher was off in his own world, worried only about his table saws. I did nothing in my own defense. While I eventually understood that Freitas wasn't Hawaiian, I must have figured I just had to take the abuse. I was, after all, skinny and haole and had no friends.

My parents had sent me to Kaimuki Intermediate, I later decided, under a misconception. This was 1966, and the California public school system, particularly in the middle-class suburbs where we had lived, was among the nation's best. The families we knew never considered private schools for their kids. Hawaii's public schools were another matter—impoverished, mired in colonial, plantation, and mission traditions, miles below the American average academically.

You would not have known that, though, from the elementary school my younger siblings attended. (Kevin was nine, Colleen seven. Michael was three and, in that pre-preschool era, still exempt from formal education.) We had rented a house on the edge of a wealthy neighborhood called Kahala, and Kahala Elementary was a well-funded little haven of progressive education. Except for the fact that the children were allowed to go to school barefoot—an astonishing piece of tropical permissiveness, we thought—Kahala Elementary could have been in a genteel precinct of Santa Monica. Tellingly, however, Kahala had no junior high. That was because every family in the area that could possibly manage it sent its kids to the private secondary schools that have for generations educated Honolulu's (and much of the rest of Hawaii's) middle class, along with its rich folk.

Ignorant of all this, my parents sent me to the nearest junior high, up in working-class Kaimuki, on the back side of Diamond Head crater, where they assumed I was getting on with the business of the eighth grade, but where in fact I was occupied almost entirely by the rigors of bullies, loneliness, fights, and finding my way, after a lifetime of unconscious whiteness in the segregated suburbs of California, in a racialized world. Even my classes felt racially constructed. For academic subjects, at least, students were assigned, on the basis of test scores, to a group that moved together from teacher to teacher. I was put in a high-end group, where nearly all my classmates were Japanese girls. There were no Hawaiians, no Samoans, no Filipinos, and the classes themselves, which were prim and undemanding, bored me in a way that school never had before. Matters weren't helped by the fact that, to my classmates, I seemed not to exist socially. And so I passed the class hours slouched in back rows, keeping an eye on the trees outside for signs of wind direction and strength, drawing page after page of surfboards and waves.

• • •

I HAD BEEN SURFING for three years by the time my father got the job that took us to Hawaii. He had been working, mostly as an assistant director, in series television—*Dr. Kildare*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Now he was the production manager on a new series, a half-hour musical variety show based on a local radio program, *Hawaii Calls*. The idea was to shoot Don Ho singing in a glass-bottomed boat, a calypso band by a waterfall, hula girls dancing while a volcano spewed, and call it a show. "It won't be the Hawaiian Amateur Hour," my father said. "But close."

"If it's really bad, we'll pretend we don't know you," my mother said. "Bill *who*?"

The budget for moving us all to Honolulu was tight, judging from the tiny cottage we rented (Kevin and I took turns sleeping on the couch) and the rusted-out old Ford we bought to get around. But the cottage was near the beach—just up a driveway lined with other cottages, on a street called Kulamanu—and the weather, which was warm even in January, when we arrived, felt like wanton luxury.

I was beside myself with excitement just to be in Hawaii. All surfers, all readers of surf magazines—and I had memorized nearly every line, every photo caption, in every surf magazine I owned—spent the bulk of their fantasy lives, like it or not, in Hawaii. And now I was there, walking on actual Hawaiian sand (coarse, strange-smelling), tasting Hawaiian seawater (warm, strange-smelling), and paddling toward Hawaiian waves (small, dark-faced, windblown).

Nothing was what I'd expected. In the mags, Hawaiian waves were always big and, in the color shots, ranged from deep, mid-ocean blue to a pale, impossible turquoise. The wind was always offshore (blowing from land to sea, ideal for surfing), and the breaks themselves were the Olympian playgrounds of the gods: Sunset Beach, the Banzai Pipeline, Makaha, Ala Moana, Waimea Bay.

All of that seemed worlds away from the sea in front of our house. Even Waikiki, known for its beginner breaks and tourist crowds, was over on the

far side of Diamond Head—the glamorous, iconic western side—along with every other part of Honolulu anybody had heard of. We were on the mountain's southeast side, down in a little saddle of sloping, shady beachfront west of Black Point. The beach was just a patch of damp sand, narrow and empty.

On the afternoon of our arrival, during my first, frantic survey of the local waters, I found the surf setup confusing. Waves broke here and there along the outer edge of a mossy, exposed reef. I was worried by all the coral. It was infamously sharp. Then I spotted, well off to the west, and rather far out at sea, a familiar minuet of stick figures, rising and falling, backlit by the afternoon sun. Surfers! I ran back up the lane. Everyone at the house was busy unpacking and fighting over beds. I threw on a pair of trunks, grabbed my board, and left without a word.

I paddled west along a shallow lagoon, staying close to the shore, for half a mile. The beach houses ended, and the steep, brushy base of Diamond Head itself took their place across the sand. Then the reef on my left fell away, revealing a wide channel—deeper water, where no waves broke—and beyond the channel ten or twelve surfers riding a scatter of dark, chest-high peaks in a moderate onshore wind. I paddled slowly toward the lineup—the wave-catching zone—taking a roundabout route, studying every ride. The surfers were good. They all had smooth, ungimmicky styles. Nobody fell off. And nobody, blessedly, seemed to notice me.

I circled around, then edged into an unpopulated stretch of the lineup. There were plenty of waves. The takeoffs were crumbling but easy. Letting muscle memory take over, I caught and rode a couple of small, mushy rights. The waves were different—but not too different—from the waves I knew in California. They were shifty but not intimidating. I could see coral on the bottom, but except for a couple of heads poking up far inside (near shore), nothing too shallow.

There was a lot of talk and laughter among the other surfers. Eavesdropping, I couldn't understand a word. They were probably speaking pidgin. I had read about pidgin in James Michener's *Hawaii* but, with my

debut at Kaimuki Intermediate still a day away, hadn't actually heard any yet. Or maybe it was some foreign language. I was the only haole (another word from Michener) in the water. At one point, an older guy paddling past me gestured seaward and said, "Outside." It was the only word spoken to me that day. And he was right: an outside set was approaching, the biggest of the afternoon, and I was grateful to have been warned.

As the sun dropped, the crowd thinned. I tried to see where people went. Most seemed to take a steep path up the mountainside to Diamond Head Road, their pale boards, carried on their heads, moving steadily, skeg-first, through the switchbacks. I caught a final wave, rode it into the shallows, and began the long paddle home through the lagoon. Lights were on in the houses now. The air was cooler, the shadows blue-black under the coconut palms along the shore. I was aglow with my good fortune. I just wished I had someone to tell: *I'm in Hawaii, surfing in Hawaii.* Then it occurred to me that I didn't even know the name of the place I'd surfed.

• • •

IT WAS CALLED CLIFFS. It was a patchwork arc of reefs that ran south and west for half a mile from the channel where I first paddled out. To learn any new spot in surfing, you first bring to bear your knowledge of other breaks—all the other waves you've learned to read closely. But at that stage my complete archives consisted of ten or fifteen California spots, and only one I really knew well: a cobblestone point in Ventura. And none of this experience prepared me especially well for Cliffs, which, after that initial session, I tried to surf twice a day.

Path to the water, Kulamanu house, 1966

It was a remarkably consistent spot, in the sense that there were nearly always waves to ride, even in what I came to understand was the off-season for Oahu's South Shore. The reefs off Diamond Head are at the southern extremity of the island, and thus pick up every scrap of passing swell. But they also catch a lot of wind, including local williwaws off the slopes of the crater, and the wind, along with the vast jigsaw expanse of the reef and the swells arriving from many different points of the compass, combined to

produce constantly changing conditions that, in a paradox I didn't appreciate at the time, amounted to a rowdy, hourly refutation of the idea of consistency. Cliffs possessed a moody complexity beyond anything I had known.

Mornings were particularly confounding. To squeeze in a surf before school, I had to be out there by daybreak. In my narrow experience the sea was supposed to be glassy at dawn. In coastal California, that is, early mornings are usually windless. Not so, apparently, in the tropics. Certainly not at Cliffs. At sunrise the trade winds often blew hard. Palm fronds thrashed overhead as I tripped down the lane, waxed board on my head, and from the seafront I could see whitecaps outside, beyond the reef, spilling east to west on a royal-blue ocean. The trades were said to be northeasterlies, which was not a bad direction, in theory, for a south-facing coast, but somehow they were always sideshore at Cliffs, and strong enough to ruin most spots from that angle.

And yet the place had a kind of growling durability that left it ridable, at least for my purposes, even in those battered conditions. Almost no one else surfed it in the early morning, which made it a good time to explore the main takeoff area. I began to learn the tricky, fast, shallow sections, and the soft spots where a quick cutback was needed to keep a ride going. Even on a waist-high, blown-out day, it was possible to milk certain waves for long, improvised, thoroughly satisfying rides. The reef had a thousand quirks, which changed quickly with the tide. And when the inshore channel began to turn a milky turquoise—a color not unlike some of the Hawaiian fantasy waves in the mags—it meant, I came to know, that the sun had risen to the point where I should head in for breakfast. If the tide was extra low, leaving the lagoon too shallow to paddle, I learned to allow more time for trudging home on the soft, coarse sand, struggling to keep my board's nose pointed into the wind.

Afternoons were a different story. The wind was usually lighter, the sea less seasick, and there were other people surfing. Cliffs had a crew of regulars. After a few sessions, I could recognize some of them. At the

mainland spots I knew, there was usually a limited supply of waves, a lot of jockeying for position, and a strictly observed pecking order. A youngster, particularly one lacking allies, such as an older brother, needed to be careful not to cross, even inadvertently, any local big dogs. But at Cliffs there was so much room to spread out, so many empty peaks breaking off to the west of the main takeoff—or, if you kept an eye out, perhaps on an inside shelf that had quietly started to work—that I felt free to pursue my explorations of the margins. Nobody bothered me. Nobody vibed me. It was the opposite of my life at school.

• • •

MY ORIENTATION PROGRAM at school included a series of fistfights, some of them formally scheduled. There was a cemetery next to the campus, with a well-hidden patch of grass down in one corner where kids went to settle their differences. I found myself facing off there with a number of boys named Freitas—none of them, again, apparently related to my hairy tormentor from wood shop. My first opponent was so small and young that I doubted he was even at our school. The Freitas clan's method for training its members in battle, it seemed, was to find some fool without allies or the brains to avoid a challenge, then send their youngest fighter with any chance at all into the ring. If he lost, the next biggest Freitas would be sent in. This went on until the nonkinsman was defeated. It was all quite dispassionate, the bouts arranged and refereed by older Freitases, and more or less fairly conducted.

My first match was sparsely attended—really of no interest to anyone—but I was still scared sick, having no seconds in my corner and no idea what the rules were. My opponent turned out to be shockingly strong for his size, and ferocious, but his arms were too short to land punches, and I eventually subdued him without much damage to either of us. His cousin, who stepped up immediately, was more my size, and our sparring was more consequential. I held my own, but we both had shiners before a senior

Freitas stepped in, declaring a draw. There would be a rematch, he said, and if I won that, somebody named Tino would come and kick my ass, no questions asked. Team Freitas departed. I remember watching them jog, laughing and loose, a happy family militia, up the long slope of the graveyard. They were evidently late for another appointment. My face hurt, my knuckles hurt, but I was giddy with relief. Then I noticed a couple of haole guys my age standing in the bushes at the edge of the clearing, looking squirrelly. I half recognized them from school, but they left without saying a word.

I won the rematch, I think. Then Tino kicked my ass, no questions asked.

There were more fights, including a multiday brawl with a Chinese kid in my agriculture class who refused to give up even when I had his face shoved deep in the red mud of the lettuce patch. This bitter tussle went on for a week. It resumed each afternoon, and never produced a winner. The other boys in the class, enjoying the show, made sure that the teacher, if he ever came round, didn't catch us at it.

I don't know what my parents thought. Cuts and bruises, even black eyes, could be explained. Football, surfing, something. My hunch, which seems right in retrospect, was that they couldn't help, so I told them nothing.

A racist gang came to my rescue. They called themselves the In Crowd. They were haoles and, their laughable gang name notwithstanding, they were impressively bad. Their leader was a jolly, dissolute, hoarse-voiced, broken-toothed kid named Mike. He was not physically imposing, but he shambled around school with a rowdy fearlessness that seemed to give everyone but the largest Samoans pause. Mike's true home, one came to understand, was a juvenile detention center somewhere—this schoolgoing was just a furlough, which he intended to make the most of. He had a younger sister, Edie, who was blond and skinny and wild, and their house in Kaimuki was the In Crowd's clubhouse. At school they gathered under a tall monkeypod tree on a red-dirt hill behind the unpainted bungalow where I took typing. My induction was informal. Mike and his buddies simply let me know I was welcome to join them under the monkeypod. And it was from the

In Crowd kids, who actually seemed to include more girls than boys, that I began to learn, first, the broad outlines, and then the minutiae, of the local racial setup. Our main enemies, I came to know, were the "mokes"—which seemed to mean anyone dark and tough.

"You been beefin' with mokes already," Mike told me.

That was true, I realized.

But my fighting career soon tailed off. People seemed to know I was now part of the haole gang, and elected to pick on other kids. Even Freitas in wood shop started easing up on me. But had he really put away his two-by-four? It was hard to imagine he would be worried by the In Crowd.

• • •

DISCREETLY, I STUDIED the surfing of some of the regulars at Cliffs—the ones who seemed to read the wave best, who found the speed pockets and wheeled their boards so neatly through their turns. My first impression was confirmed: I had never seen such smoothness. Hand movements were strikingly in synch with feet. Knees were more deeply bent than in the surfing I was used to, hips looser. There wasn't much nose-riding, which was the subspecialty rage at the time on the mainland and required scurrying, when the opportunity arose, to the front of one's board—hanging five, hanging ten, defying the obvious physics of flotation and glide. I didn't know it then, but what I was looking at was classic Island style. I just took my mental notes from the channel, and began, without thinking about it, to walk the nose less.

There were a few young guys, including one wiry, straight-backed kid who looked to be about my age. He stayed away from the main peak, riding peripheral waves. But I craned to see what he did. Even on the funky little waves he chose, I could see that he was shockingly quick and poised. He was the best surfer my age I had ever seen. He rode an unusually short, light, sharp-nosed board—a bone-white clear-finish Wardy. He caught me