

I'm all alone

in the first row

feeling sorry for myself

with my ankle resting on the chair next to me,

when Sister Tammy comes in wearing a T-shirt

that says *Jesus Saves, Bro.*

"Take one and pass it back!" She hands me a stack of half sheets.

"I am going to give you five minutes to silently brainstorm

what you want to give up for Lent."

She smiles at me wide. "Lily! What a pleasant surprise

to have you up in the front for a change," she remarks,

more sarcastic than genuine.

"Happy to see you taking the start of the holy season *so seriously.*"

(Bite me.)

Name: Aouli Smith

Directions: Finish the sentence!

For Lent, I am giving up . . .

~~donuts~~

~~traitorous best friends~~

~~bitchy sisters~~

dads

my will to live!!!!

Halfway through

what is starting to feel

like the longest hour of my life

a boy I've never seen before appears

in the doorway,

causing everyone's heads to turn and look

at the same time.

He's dressed like he went to mass.

Navy pants, collared shirt, loafers.

But he didn't sit with the rest of us up front.

I would have noticed.

Everything about him is polished and neat
except for the black waves that keep falling
into his eyes.

He's tall and broad-shouldered, and he stands
like he knows his size, like he doesn't want
to get in anyone's way.

And his skin, a deep brown, is the same
warm shade as Aunty 'Ehu's. Perennially rich.

He takes a step into the classroom, sliding
an ukulele from under his arm to
the front of his stomach.

Something to shield himself with, perhaps.

The wood body is painted with flowers
I recognize from my tūtū's garden back in Waimea.

Bunches of plumeria.

Garlands of pīkake.

Proud stalks of pua manu.

"Sorry I'm late," he says to Sister Tammy.

But he doesn't sound sorry. Not really.

And that makes me smile
for the first time
all day.

Sister Tammy waves him toward her.

"Come in! The more the merrier!"

But if you ask me, she sounds
pretty miffed about being interrupted.

"You can take this seat." She gestures
to the chair
beside
me,

the one she failed
to notice I'm using
to elevate my ankle.

"Next to Lily."

At that moment,

our gazes meet,

and then

I see

the most peculiar thing:

stars

sparkling in his eyes.

His eyes

are bright

beaming

stars

that shine

to lead

a lost soul

through

the unforgiving

thrash

of the sea.

Star eyes

that see

the dark

skies

plaguing

me

to make me

a galaxy.

Star Eyes

is

the

most

beautiful

boy

I've

ever

seen.

Our first conversation.

Star Eyes: I can grab another chair—?

Me: It's fine.

Star Eyes: Really, I can.

Me: Really, it's fine.

Star Eyes: What happened to your ankle?

Me: I don't think I want to talk about it.

Star Eyes: That's okay.

Me: Are you sure?

Star Eyes: Of course.

Me:

Star Eyes:

Me: You need to write down what you're giving up.

Star Eyes: For what?

Me: For Lent.

Star Eyes: Yeah, I'm probably not going to do that.

Me: Really?

Star Eyes: Yeah.

Me: Why?

Star Eyes: There's nothing I'm willing to live without.

Me: That's cool.

Star Eyes: What are you giving up?

Me: A lot of things.

Star Eyes: Why?

Me: There's a lot I'm willing to live without.

Star Eyes: Can I ask you something?

Me: Sure.

Star Eyes: Are you Hawaiian?

Star Eyes: Because I am, too.

I don't know

what to say at first. “How did you—?”

“Well, are you?”

“Yes, but—”

He beams. “I knew it.”

What he doesn't say,
but his star eyes tell me,

is that it's not hard
to figure out

when someone was born
of the same sky
of the same sea
of the same people

as you.

He laughs,

jostling me slightly with his elbow,

gently though,

like we're longtime friends,

and that nanosecond of

contact

is enough

to shock me back to life.

“I’m just playing with you,”

he says quietly, kindly,

as if we’re sharing a secret.

“My dad told me to look for

the only other Hawaiian kids.

We know your Aunty ‘Ehu.”

Ah.

And it all starts

to make sense.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

I’m silent.

Why am I not answering his question?

His very, very, very easy question?

Did I forget my name?

It’s possible.

“Aouli,” I say finally. “My name is Aouli.”

I tell him my real name, instead

of my nickname

because it feels overwhelmingly important

that he know who I really am
right from the start.

He smiles.

The world expands.

“Like the big blue sky?” he asks.

I nod.

“I’m Nalu.”

I’m not fluent in ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i,
but I know enough to know his name.

“Like the big blue sea?”

His smile brightens,
and for a moment, neither of us speaks—

“Aouli.” He says my name without
anything else
before it
or after.

He says it like it’s complete,
like it’s full,

like it's perfect all on its own,

and in his mouth,

it is.