

## Before I Leave You

### A guest post by Lynne Golodner about mother-daughter journeys

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Paddling into the lifting waves, a constant current rolling in and sucking out, I hefted across two-and-a-half miles of lively ocean with my daughter, though she never really likes to kayak and I am more ambitious than wise.

The Mokulua Islands look closer than they are. Locals call them “the Mokes.” We are Midwesterners, a different kind of hardy than the people who are home in the white sands of Oahu. My beautiful daughter, come to Hawaii for college, strong and bold since the day she was born, made this choice on an impulse, believing she could live anywhere in the world. Sandwiched between two sensitive boys, she was the baby who stayed up late and slept until nine, the two-year-old who insisted on choosing her own clothes, the ten-year-old who won the neighborhood baking contest, her cake pops more impressive than any adult creation.

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So I flew four thousand, four hundred and seventy-seven miles to move Eliana into an apartment near the University of Hawaii. So far from home, that I couldn't come for a quick hug or to fill her fridge. I dedicated ten August days to help her learn the names of streets, follow the route from apartment to campus, figure out how to live far from home. And when I left, we'd have only FaceTime and text to connect us. After we'd bought all the sheets and shelves that she needed, I just wanted time with her, so we drove through the green-furred mountains to the island's windward side for a day in a boat.



I don't remember any of what we said that day, just the sweet of her voice and the kiss of the turquoise waters against our tandem. It took us an hour to cross the riotous waves and reach Moko Nui, a 225-foot volcanic cone that is a government-protected haven for shearwaters. Our guide, a buff, golden twentysomething who rode the waves like she'd tamed them, called it a calm day, but I found the waves tumultuous, rising in constant aggravation. We paddled and hefted and leaned into the motion to get to the seabird sanctuary, sunlight glistening like diamonds on the water. We leaped from the boat and dragged it to the satiny beach, where a pregnant monk seal was sleeping. “Stay back,” the guide waved us away, the magnificent mama's gray body gleaming in the sun.

The Hawaiian monk seal is one of the most endangered species in the world. It lives on the Mokes and sometimes, the Johnston Atoll, 1,000 miles southwest of Hawaii. The pup will be born black and turn gray in time. Every year, these majestic creatures lose a layer of skin and fur, shedding the algae that grows on them while they forage at sea, becoming new again and again. This transformation is called the catastrophic molt, and they stay on land for the ten days or so that it takes to lose one layer and gain another.

The monk seal mama remains close to her pup for six weeks after birth, nursing and teaching the baby everything it needs to know. The mother eats nothing during that time, does nothing for herself, her child her only focus. That's all the time they get, six weeks together, and then the mother noses into the swirling ocean and swims away, leaving the young to fend for itself.

After, alone, the pup combs its birthplace for weeks, sometimes longer, learning to forage. Then, it, too, pushes off, traveling far on the journey of life, its only compass embedded in DNA.

I used to think that I would find a place that felt like home. I'd arrive and know, *this is where I belong*. I traveled far, set up apartments, unpacked my life from the boxes I'd stored it in, learned street names, yet found only loneliness in the echoes of white walls meant to welcome anyone and nourish no one. Until one day, people inhabited my definition of home. Tethered by love, by choice, by shared values and common histories.

With snorkels and masks, Eliana and I tried to see beneath the waves, but the water was murky and the masks leaked. So we left them on the beach and swam free, parallel to land. Later, we padded over dark and jagged rocks to the Queen's Bath, a tide pool roiling with minerals that turn the water emerald. It was bathy-warm, and we floated easy. The fisheries department wouldn't let us wander further, keeping the island safe for long-winged seabirds that fly so close to the water they seem to shear off the tips of waves. That's how the shearwater earned its name. It, too, migrates far and can survive longer than fifty years. All these creatures, living by instinct, going where the wind takes them.

My daughter decided to move to Hawaii after a family trip for my fiftieth birthday. We kayaked on Kauai, hiked near blowholes on Maui, but never visited Oahu. Back home in the dark cold of a Michigan winter, she submitted an application for the university in Honolulu. The acceptance was almost immediate. I'm not sure she thought about what it would be like to move so far from anything familiar. She listened only to the call of endless sun and abundant rainbows, yearned to escape the manufactured heat of Midwest winter, shed the layers of blankets and sweaters, learn to surf the constant waves.

I understood her need to go. Once, I, too, heard the call to know the shape of this earth-home, the lilt and tenor of its different landscapes. Weeks after college graduation, I fled east, and over the course of years, set up temporary homes in New York skyscrapers and Washington, D.C. walkups. I came back when the longing for a slower pace and the friendly faces of my hometown overwhelmed my need to wander. Still, I helped her on her journey, made her new bed, folded her clothes onto shelves.

It was our last day together when we kayaked to an ocean island. And though the sun and salt had sapped every surge of energy, we eventually had to paddle back to shore. Eliana and I pulled the

water and pushed it away in the shifting waves. Dip and stroke and wind-like breaths and heartbeats temple-tapping and skin buzzing in the brightness. Two-and-a-half-miles felt so much farther on the return. The pad of my right arm winced, tender as a bruise. Later, it would flower purple and seethe. I'm not sure what I did to harm myself, maybe paddling too intensely, too focused on getting to home.

The surf breaks on both sides of Moku Nui. Spearfish and tiger sharks hover on the forbidden ocean side. Na Mokulua, "two islands" in Hawaiian, older than anything human, formed more than a million years ago, is part of the Ko'olau shield, a basaltic volcano. The ancients restricted the Mokes to Kahuna, priests. Today, these tiny islands are home to twelve bird species—wedge-tailed shearwaters, red-footed bobbys, even the Great Frigatebird, a black beauty with a seven-foot wingspan.

From November to May, whales migrate past. My daughter stayed just one semester. A week after we arrived, her first boyfriend broke her heart over the phone, and she called at three in the morning in need of a mother's voice. But I think she knew she would leave even before she arrived. Going far away can help you see the beauty of home, the power of deep love from people who know you. Pulled to leave, inspired to return, each generation learns the same lesson, in its own time.