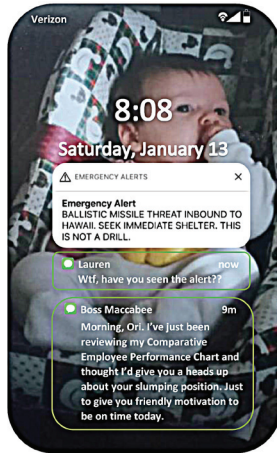


MARTHA BOYD

Disaster



My ears are wailing even though I can't hear any sirens. They can remember the test sirens and they're performing them at painful volumes as if they don't trust my eyes. They don't think seeing that terrifying death sentence is enough for me to take seriously. It's up to my ears to pop the cork of my body's adrenaline valve. Kick-start my heart. I've been trying to prepare myself for this possibility for a while, but it turns out nothing can prepare you for this inability to breathe, this lack of saliva and yet too much saliva at the same time. This aching panic. This burning red vision, even when I clench my eyelids together. I keep seeing Madhuri and Alana in red, there's nothing I can do. But I wish I was with them, at least. I wish today was my day with Madhuri, and then Alana would have rushed straight here to be with us. Well, her, but still.

“Welcome to voicemail, if you’d like to...” the same measured tone, even more sickening than the sirens, for the fifth time instead of Alana. If the voicemail lady were here right now, I’d strangle her. She’d die anyway once the missile hits. If anything I’d be doing her a favour.

Alana didn’t answer my text last night, but I thought she’d at least pick up *now*. I’ll give her a chance to call me back while I do something I should have done long ago: *‘Maccabee, just a ‘friendly’ txt to let u know that if there was a Chart for Honolulu’s Worst Bosses, you’d be no.1, lolo kanapapiki’*. Ping. Oh shit, a sound more piercing than the voicemail lady. That was just my angry draft. The draft I usually delete. Maccabee will not take that lightly, he’ll probably strip my veins and replace them with wires as an example to everyone else.

Alana’s still not picking up. I can’t just sit here.

Usually it would only take three minutes to drive there, but today cars have been abandoned at random angles. From above, it probably looks like a child couldn’t be bothered to put away their toy cars. Like a shouting mom is incoming, not a missile.

The palm trees along Puowaina Drive usually wave at me from the sidelines, cheering me on. “You’ll win Alana back this time, Ori,” they call, swaying, woozy from too many Mai Tais. Today, they stand up to attention like malnourished soldiers, awaiting battle, with their hair on end.

The sun’s glare is smudging my vision. I’m rifling through images of my favourite parts of Hawaii rather than the road ahead. The Aloha Tower probably looks sadder than ever, its clock hands itching to turn back, wishing never to say goodbye, only hello.

Diamond Head, that’s where we should be right now. We were even looking at houses there just before Madhuri was born.

“This would be perfect, just look at that view,” I remember saying.

“Le’ahi isn’t for me. I don’t like being reminded of past or potential disasters,” Alana’s tone was unflinching, as always.

“But that’s why it’s so good for us, we’d be safe here. It’s where people go in tsunamis.”

I guess eventually I became a ‘potential disaster’ to Alana and that’s why she stayed with her mom and formed a moat between us. A moat that I’ll keep trying to swim across.

People are scattering themselves across the roads. Diving into each other's arms. Diving isn't the right word, that makes it sound elegant, synchronised. Instead it's the kind of trauma that would make you hug a murderer if he was the only person around. A stranger's arms won't do for me right now. I will keep swerving until I get to Madhuri's.

I abandon my car as soon as their house is in sight. Alana's car's not there. Strange.

My legs have taken on a speed I didn't think they were capable of, despite feeling as liable to snap as the palm trees. I collapse through their door to see Alana's mom on her knees sobbing. As soon as she sees me, she flinches and clasps her hands together.

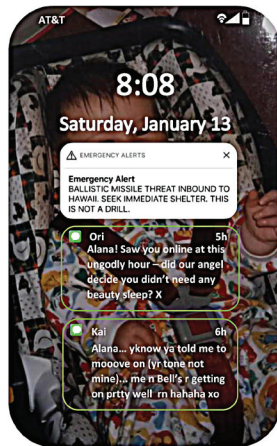
"Madhuri?" I double over and grab my legs, "Alana?"

Lahela jumps up at me like a hound grabbing me by the collar, "You mean they're not with you?"

We both scramble for our phones.

"You try, Lahela, she didn't answer any of my calls."

Not even answering her mom now either. Lahela's arms will have to do for now. We can both sob and pretend we're praying together.



I knew Ori was still hung up on me but I never thought he'd go and fake a missile threat for me. It must be fake. It can't be real. Must be him. He probably thinks I'll snatch Madhuri from her cot and run five blocks into his arms so that he can be with his two loves

before we're obliterated. Could've at least made it more realistic by choosing something that meant just *he* was in danger rather than the whole freaking state. Used to think I'd hit the jackpot when I met someone with a Computer Science degree. Thought I'd no longer have to worry about being so hopeless with computers. Guess that's another thing to add to my Mom's list of *Reasons Why I'm Too Naive*.

I can hear Mom hurtling towards my door. Probably to give her favourite morning lecture about how I shouldn't check my phone before checking on Madhuri as if I'm 'still some attention-seeking teenage heap of acne'. Her favourite line is something about how, as a mother, you're a volcano: you must erupt with love and affection rather than expecting to receive it. I wonder when that rule expires because the only kind of volcano she seems to be is the vicious lava kind. Specifically aimed at me. She's still got love for Madhuri and God, of course.

Thankfully, my hands are playing peek-a-boo with Madhuri rather than on my phone or down my pants by the time Mom explodes into my room. She really does look like she's got lava for blood today. Her mascara (that she can never be bothered to wash off) is swimming in sweat down her cheeks. Her skin thinly veils a map of pronounced rivers for veins and trees for pores. Her eczema's flared up as badly as when Madhuri had an anaphylactic shock. A mountain range of stress reddening her knuckles. Why's she clutching the Virgin Mary?

"D-duct tape, where—have you got it?" Mom wheezes, splashing holy water over me and Madhuri out of the Virgin Mary's plastic head.

"What for? Ori hasn't tricked you too, has he?"

"For the windows, Alana! Fill the bath, bottles, pots—anything you can find," Mom says, chucking my clothes in all directions. "Have you not heard the news—about the missile?!"

My oesophagus tugs itself into a tight fisherman's knot, though not tight enough to stop me from retching. Madhuri smiles at me with a glint in her eye. She thinks she's onto something. She thinks her smile is enough to calm me down.

"That's actually real? Are you sure? I thought it was just one of Ori's pranks," the words struggle through my mouth. If I don't say them it might continue to be a hoax.

The bags under Mom's eyes double—disappointed—how did she raise such a stupid daughter? I've got the same hollow feeling that crept in as soon as Mom told me the news about Dad. She doesn't joke about this kind of thing. Or anything for that matter. I manage to steady my hands enough to scroll through reels of proof on twitter:



I try to decipher the words but they're warped by tears and the screen's brightness. Kai always used to mock me for that. "How d'you check whether you've got any messages from me at work without lighting up the whole office?" he'd say.

"Maybe you should ring Ori. I'm sure he'd want to be with Madhuri in his last," Mom sinks onto the edge of my bed and plants a kiss on Madhuri's forehead, "at this time."

Kai. It's Kai I want to be with, even if I've only got twenty minutes left. Those twenty minutes should be spent right. And he has a right to know how I feel before... I wince and squeeze Madhuri instead of thinking it. You'll forgive me won't you, Madhuri? You're too young to know whether you're with your real dad anyway. Kai's reasoning is swirling round in my head: "Yes, it's more conventional to be with the baby's father, but is it conventional to be with a bald, fat 25-year-old?"

Kai sounded pretty not 'over me' in his text last night so hopefully he still subscribes to that logic. Pyjamas will have to do; no time to change. I'm not going to sit around waiting for Ori just to make him and Mom happy.

I make one allowance before we go: I grab Madhuri a juice box. An armful of Madhuri and juice means it's time to sprint, rip open the door and—

“What are you doing, Alana?” Mom's voice box sounds like it's about to snap, “Ori can come to you. Get back here, don't you remember the ads: ‘get inside, stay inside!’”

—get into the car. After many failed attempts of trying to put the key in, I grip the steering wheel to try to stop my hands from shaking. Madhuri seems to have picked up on the situation and is yowling from the back. I try to drown her out by turning the music up, and just two songs later and we've made it to Kai's.

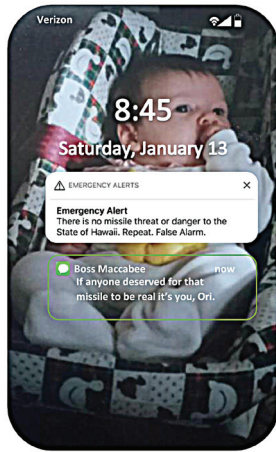
As soon as Kai opens the door I'm hit by wafts of strong whiskey and the wails of his favourite heartbreak album. He once joked that if I ever caught him listening to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and drinking then I could officially declare his heart un-mendable and report the woman responsible to the cops. I never thought that woman would be me. He catches me glaring guiltily at his record player. In response he cranes his neck and examines the floorboards' cracks. There's no time to explain so I lean over and kiss him, hoping that's enough. Madhuri cries and flails her arms in between us, hitting our chests.

“You look b-beautiful,” Kai sways backwards.

“What, even when there's a ballistic missile coming?”

“Even when there's a missile coming, even in—” Kai gestures towards my Hello Kitty pyjamas “—what are they, PJs from when you were like, eleven?”

DISASTER



I flash the alert at Lahela, but she's probably already read the news on my face. The screen lights up her expressions that dance between relief and wanting to punch someone. Neither of us is ready to exchange words yet, so instead we let out a concoction of laughs, sobs, bleeps and butts.

Eventually, Lahela says, "Have you signed into that phone tracker thing yet?"

"It says Alana's on Auwaiolimu Street. Do you know anyone who lives there?"

Lahela's eyebrows tighten. "Shall we go over?"

The car ride is clammy with silence. I turn onto Prospect Street and spot a heap of trash beneath a yellow diamond sign that shouts 'FALLING ROCKS'. I sense that the air is filled with mutual rage and sympathy. It's stifling. I just wish we could spill everything we're thinking. I wonder if the scenarios in Lahela's head are as dismal as mine.

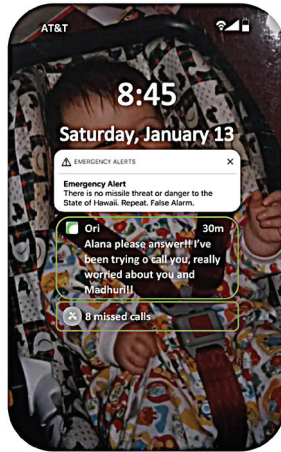
"What was that message from your boss about?" Lahela finally breaks.

"I think we're here," I reply, tripping out of the car.

275 Auwaiolimu Street is a soulless off-white apartment block right next to a cemetery. Maybe Alana was just trying to be practical. She does have some funny beliefs so maybe she believes if you don't end up in a cemetery your corpse will be forced to run sweaty marathons across the earth forever. Or maybe she wanted to be with

her dad. But she's not in the cemetery; I can see her and Madhuri through the window of the ground floor flat, with a man. A man whose taut calves look like they've run more than a few marathons. Maybe he's the devil, stopping her from reaching the cemetery. A devil with perfect ringlets. He's probably got better teeth than me too.

I try to imagine that I'm seeing them through a television screen. They're just featuring on some ridiculous telenovela. They'd never shatter my life like this. It can't be the apartment she's fallen for—even from across the road I can smell the damp. Mine and Alana's eyes are locked in a staring contest through the protective screen, not the kind we had in the early days where we pretended we were competitive rather than just liking nothing more than each other's eyes.



Kai looks over my shoulder to check that my phone says 'false alarm' too. He grins and lets out a hiccup-laugh. He burrows his head into the crescent where my neck meets my shoulder. I'm feeling much more lightheaded at the news of not dying than other people probably are, so I tug myself away from Kai and place Madhuri on the floor. What if it was just the missile that panicked me into choosing this, choosing Kai? It might have been some biological impulse. Some urge for last-minute procreation in case Hawaii's men were all wiped out. A minute ago my thoughts seemed to fizz

and revolve around Kai, or the feeling of Kai at least. A swirling feeling like a record but with no crackling, no imperfections. But now I think maybe I was feeling faint because of the thought of death by ballistic missile. And my tongue feels coated in Kai and I'm not sure I like that anymore. Kai's become whiskey.

Kai's eyes are weighing down on me, heavy. Looking at me like I'm his new addiction, I'll make it all OK.

Honey, just allow me one more chance

To get along with you

Honey, just allow me one more chance

I'll do anything for you

Now Bob Dylan's on my back too. What if I *am* Kai's only chance? My head aches. Maybe if I don't give him one more chance I'll become his missile rather than his whiskey, and surely that's worse? I can't destroy him again. Especially not now that I know he'd still think about me even when there's an inbound missile. Still have his heartbreak record on rather than trying to find shelter. It might be better to be loved that much even if I only fake it back. A little rum on the side should help me play the part. At least then I'll have somewhere to live that isn't with Mom.

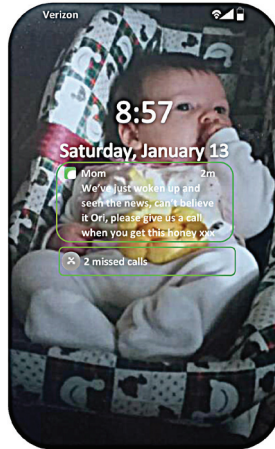
Madhuri gives me a glare, very uncharacteristic of a nine-month-old. The kind of glare that says she'd rather be in an orphanage than with me. Madhuri, what if you're the one blurring my vision? Some trace of motherly instinct that's tangled in my biology might be telling me that Kai's not the right dad for you. But I think my happiness is the fast track to yours, so stop interrupting with those eyes. Madhuri shuffles dangerously close to Kai's record player. Kai tries to look casual as he staggers over and lifts Madhuri. I can tell he's going for an 'I'm willing to accept you and this pooping-record-missile into my life' kind of embrace, rather than 'I care more about my records than your baby'. I put Kai out of his misery and hug them both, but he pushes me away and points to the window.

Mom and Ori look murderous, framed in a dramatic shot of distant mountains and skyscrapers. I'm glad there's a sheet of glass between us.

"Does this mean," Kai's voice is barely audible, "you're going back to—"

“You’re who I chose in the missile threat, aren’t you?” The question comes out slightly more defensive than I intended but it doesn’t delay Kai’s smile.

“I’m so glad it was a false alarm, but the scary part is that we live in a world where it was believable. Shall we move to a different planet?” Kai’s smile widens and he takes my hand.



My body recoils towards the car, interrupted by Lahela’s grip.

“Don’t you want to hear what she has to say, Ori?” Lahela sounds earnest.

“You can tell her I’m filing for custody of Madhuri.” The words shock even me. I’m glad I’ve managed to spit them out. Managed to crumble my Fisher-Price doll’s house vision of me, Alana and Madhuri. Realised my truth before she gets out here and poisons me with her own idea of the truth.

This isn’t just a show. Things are going to have to get legal. I chant to myself in preparation for when Alana finally comes to the car, dragged by her mom. Alana taps on the window. I practise my speech as I roll it down. But even after all that practising, when she’s actually here all I say is: “The view’s nice here. But won’t that cemetery be too much of a reminder of past or potential disasters?”