The last showing at old Kānewai Theater was to a crowd of two. The movie playing was George Lucas’s *The Empire Strikes Back*. Earlier in the week, the first showing of the movie drew a crowd of twenty-three, and each night thereafter the crowd diminished by half. It didn’t help that the movie was showing after premiering seven years earlier in a more posh theater one town over. And it didn’t help the theater’s turnstile that most of the young folks of the community would rather hang out at the new bowling alley or the family billiards parlor than at the theater to see the latest third-run movie. And, anyway, when there was a new movie to see, most of the residents would make the trip to Honolulu and pay five dollars for admission, more than three times what they would pay for a ticket at the Kānewai Theater. The downtown theaters were always air-conditioned and reasonably clean, though one thing that the Kānewai Theater had over its ultramodern rivals was its fresh popcorn. The old-timers always made the point that you couldn’t get better-tasting popcorn than at the theater’s concession, which made its own popcorn from scratch using a popper purchased secondhand from a renovated Savoy in Brooklyn. The uniquely good taste of the popcorn came from the touch of sesame oil and pulverized Hawaiian salt that were used to flavor the butter. And at fifty cents a bag, it was a bargain that was hard to pass up.

The old theater, the first on the windward side of the island, had seen better days. The doors had initially opened to the public in 1946. Those days the showings started on Thurs-
day and ran to Tuesday, with matinees on the weekends at noon and 4:00 p.m. People from miles around came to the theater on horses and in buggies; and, later, with the popularization of the automobile, in cars. The walls of the building were constructed with crushed-coral hollow tile and its roof was covered with corrugated iron sheeting that was painted a metallic avocado green; when it rained, the projectionist had to turn up the volume so that people could hear over the drumming from above.

The original owner of the theater was Casey Akana, the only son of a prominent Chinese-Hawaiian family in Kānewai who had owned several sizable properties in Kānewai before the big earthquake. He had left the islands in the late thirties and went to a small liberal arts college in upper state New York. Dropping out during his third year following an unfortunate relationship with the son of the college president, he bought a one-way train ticket to New York City and joined a small off-Broadway company, getting bit parts in a few productions but being mainly the company’s all-purpose techie. After seven years of living hand-to-hand and being frustrated professionally—at best, the only acting parts he could get were that of Oriental servants and the like—he began yearning for the country living in Kānewai and the life of leisure and dignity that he had taken for granted, being the son of rich parents. He returned home for good right before the war ended. Back in Kānewai and immediately missing the social life of New York, he cajoled and finally won over his mother to manipulate his father into liquidating a large portion of the family’s land holdings. With this small fortune, he built a theater on a small leftover parcel in the middle of the town. In three years he was forced to sell out because poor management had turned the theater into a disastrously losing business.

The theater was bought by Wah Lau Ching, the autocratic family head who owned one of the two grocery stores in Kānewai. One son, Hennesey, was the town drunk and dunce, denounced by the senior Ching as “unworthy to be
part of my family” (translation from the Cantonese). Early one Sunday morning, while driving to Mass, Claudio Yoon saw him wading out on the mudflats, and that was the last time anyone in Kānewai ever saw him again. With the help of his other son Hiram, Mr. Ching began the renovation of the front of the theater, which Hiram finished after his father’s death only three weeks into the project. Two small commercial store fronts were added; a carpet of deep carmine was laid in the lobby and aisles; and the exterior of the theater was repainted in a Kaiser pink, according to the wishes of Mr. Ching. One year and one day after his father’s death, Hiram hired Paul Navarro to repaint the theater a light sienna. One of the store fronts became storage for the theater, and the other was rented to Mr. Pedro Rizon, a barber, who stayed in that location for forty-three years. Rizon gave the best scissors-cut this side of the Koʻolau, and for twenty-seven years no one could find a better bargain than his fifty-cent haircut.

The last showing was announced in a one-by-two-inch ad in the local daily. Nobody in the community seemed to care, for the theater had lost its purpose, which was to provide the source of Hollywood entertainment in town, years before. For every household now had at least one television with a VCR and almost all subscribed to some form of cable TV service. And, if anyone wanted to see the latest movie, all that it took was a trip to Honolulu, an excellent excuse for a family to go holoholo.

Three months before the announcement, negotiations were fast being finalized by the Ching family with a fast-food corporation based in Carson City, Nevada—Mama Mason’s Country Fried Chicken & Tacos. There were already three franchises in Honolulu and another on a neighbor island, and this would be the first one on the windward side. The Chings had given Mama Mason a twenty-five-year lease, which would give them a gross income of $3.6 million. The plans called for the tearing down of the ancient structure one month after the last showing and the start of construction shortly after. Everything seemed to be on schedule until the
signs started coming up on the side of the theater, one week after the theater officially closed its doors.

No one knew who was spraypainting the graffiti, and everyone wanted to know. The signs started innocently enough. The first graffiti was a large red heart with the words “Richard ‘n Cindy” inside. People smiled or laughed at the sign, for they knew that the names were for Richard Cordeiro and Cynthia Naelehu, who later became Cynthia Cordeiro. There followed others—“Katie ‘n Norton,” “Lance ‘n Lily,” “Harry ‘n Amy”—who were all legitimately paired off. Everyone thought it was a big joke, someone playing a nostalgic prank using the side of the condemned theater, which had once been the social gathering spot for the entire community. But it became disturbing when other messages started showing up on the wall, like “Charley McKinley’s father is not his real father,” and “Bobby Kim ‘n Sandy Wakashida” (who were both happily married, but not to each other), and “Matilda Nunes got pregnant in Row 37” (whose only child, Jason, was told that his father had died in Vietnam), and so on.

“I t’ink is da humbug boy doing all dis,” said George Hayashida, referring to Kalani Humphrey, the community bad boy.

“How can?” his wife, Joyce, remarked. She cracked two eggs in the hot cast-iron frying pan. George liked his eggs with the yolks intact and the whites just turning solid around them. “He in jail.”

“But den mus’ be one of his friends coming ‘round and putting up dose signs, making trouble. Maybe he wen go visit da bastard in jail and da bastard wen tell him put up dose kine stupid signs, fo’ make trouble fo’ everybody, like he always doing.”

Joyce Hayashida shrugged her shoulders, though nodding her head in tentative agreement. No one could pass any fair judgment on Kalani Humphrey. He had earned his notoriety by ripping off almost every other household in the community. He had knocked up at least a half dozen maidens of
the town. He even stole twenty dollars from his great-grand-
father’s coin purse when he was eight years old, though he
didn’t know that the old blind man was a relation. Nobody
liked Kalani Humphrey, and whenever something went wrong
in Kānewai, it seemed that somehow Kalani Humphrey was
connected to it.

“But you know,” Joyce Hayashida reflected, “he been in
prison fo’ t’ree years already. I dunno if he wen do ’em.”

“If I say he did it, then he did it,” George growled. He
gave an extra stir to his coffee. “I know he did it. If he nevah
do it, den wouldn’t have no mo’ stupid signs like on da side
like dat.”

Joyce shook her head, her lips pursed. It wasn’t worth
arguing with her husband. Let him think he always right, she
thought. Then she broke the egg yolks and turned off the
stove.

When Hiram Ching and a representative of Trinity Corpo-
ration, the mother company of Mama Mason’s Country Fried
Chicken & Tacos, went to inspect the premises early one
morning, they could not get in. A six-foot-high pile of garbage
was pressed against the front glass doors from the inside.
Hiram Ching went to the back to unlock the door, but this
door, too, would not budge.

“Damn vandals,” he quipped to Mr. Henderson, the rep-
resentative of Trinity.

“Do you have problems like this all the time?” Hender-
son looked a bit worried.

“No—no—no—no,” Hiram rattled off. “This the first
time. Kānewai is one peaceful town. We cleaned up our act
long time ago. All the bad elements either left town or in jail
right now.” For a moment he thought of Kalani Humphrey.
He shook his head, thinking how stupid he had been to hire
the Humphrey boy as an usher a few years back; the boy had
scammed him by taking in kids for half the price and pock-
eting the rest of the money.
“Is there any other way into the building?” an irritated Henderson asked.

“Yeah-yeah. Let me think.” Hiram tried the back door again, then sighed and led Henderson to the side of the building, where there were two windows, one for the women’s restroom and the other for the men’s.

“What’s all this?” Henderson asked, referring to the graffiti-covered walls.

“Ahh . . . just some of the young punks around here. They don’t have anything else to do.”

“Do you have problems with graffiti? I thought you said you didn’t have problems with vandals?”

“No, not really.”

“Then what’s all this?”

“Must be the work of outsiders coming in. This the only time we been getting this. Like I told you, this community is real quiet and peaceful.”

The window to the women’s restroom was ajar. Hiram placed an empty wooden box under the window of the men’s restroom, which was locked shut, and stepped up on the box. He slipped one of his keys under the lower edge of the window and ran it to the middle to find the lock.

“What are you doing?” Henderson asked, looking at the other, open window.

“I’m going inside,” Hiram answered, thinking to himself how stupid the haole was, though he didn’t think it necessary to explain that it was improper to enter the building through the women’s side.

“But . . .”

Before Henderson could verbalize his thought, the lock popped free. Hiram pried the window open with his finger-tips, then wiggled his pear-shaped body through the opening and climbed in, balancing on a narrow ledge inside the window. Catching his breath for a few seconds, he stepped down from the ledge, misnegotiated a shadow as a foothold, and fell to the concrete floor. But it was a small fall, and no physical damage was done.
“Come inside,” Hiram puffed, picking himself up from the floor and dusting off his jacket.

“Why don’t you open the back door for me?”

Hiram muttered an “Okay,” but not without feeling like a guinea pig. He shook off the remaining dust and dirt from his pants, picked up the pen and bits of paper notes that had fallen out of his shirt pocket, then proceeded to the auditorium. He passed the entrance to the women’s restroom with a touch of apprehension, for though he never personally saw or experienced it, he was very aware of the many stories about a milk-white, faceless apparition that appeared behind the backs of women touching up their makeup in the mirror. It became a common practice for them to use the restroom in pairs. Hiram’s hands became sweaty and his heart skipped a beat. No, there’s no ghost here, he reasoned to himself, but that couldn’t settle the skin crawling on the back of his neck.

In the semi-darkness, he felt his way along the hallway to the switch box and turned on the interior lights, then entered the auditorium, where his nostrils were smacked with the awful odor of cheap perfume. It was as if someone had dumped an entire bottle right in the middle of the room. He swore loudly at the vandals whom he was sure had broken into the theater and committed this foul-smelling play. Later in the afternoon, he told himself, he’d see Val Rodriguez, slip him a twenty, and ask him to visit the pool hall and find out who among the punks did it. Then he’d slip Val another twenty, and Val would know what to do with those bums. Hiram nodded and smiled in selfish glee as he visualized Val busting their heads.

But he stopped in the middle of an upbeat of an assuring nod. Slashed in bright red paint on the baseboard of the movie screen was a message in large, bold letters: “KALANI HUMPHREY WENT SLEEP WITH CLARISSA IN THE LADY’S BATH-ROOM.”

For a moment, he actually had some doubts about his wife, but he shook off his uncertainty and cursed at the ridiculous fiction of the punks.
Henderson was pounding at the back door. Hiram rushed to the janitor’s closet and took out a bottle of cleaning fluid and raced back to the sign. But no matter how hard he scoured, the paint wouldn’t rub off. Henderson was now pounding and shouting for Hiram to open up. Hiram hoofed it to the front office and brought back a fresh gallon of paint. Using an old mop, he sloshed the paint over the graffiti, then hid the paint and mop in the janitor’s closet. He hurried to the back door, which had been latched from the inside, and let Henderson in.

“How come it took you so long?” Henderson asked, scanning the dim interior for clues.

“Oh, I had to do something.”

“I hope you didn’t start painting the interior,” the representative of Trinity Corporation commented, noticing a splash of paint on Ching’s right hand. “Smells like fresh paint in here.”

Ching thought quickly, rubbing off some of the paint on his hand on a wall. “Ah—the stupid janitor—he was painting the wall and he never tell me about the wet paint.” He laughed and before Henderson could pry more said, “Tell me, why you want to look inside the building for anyway?” He wished he had thought of the question earlier.

“Well,” an observing Henderson began as they entered the auditorium, “my company thought that we might keep the existing structure if it was unique in design, but . . .” He turned to the stage and regarded the ratty drapery for a moment. “But from the looks of what I’ve seen so far, this building is just four tile walls and an old rusty roof. I think our best bet is to tear it down, rather than renovate an old junk building.”

Ching nodded his head, then led the representative of Trinity on a short tour of the projection room.

The graffiti on the outside walls continued, becoming progressively more scandalous.
“HARRY AND ELLA HAVE NOT DONE IT IN EIGHT AND A HALF YEARS.”

“PAUL NAVARRO AND CASSIE CHUN USED TO MEET EVERY THURSDAY IN ROW FORTY-FOUR.” (Thursday nights were Pat Navarro’s night for blackjack with her friends; her husband was a member of the Thursday Night Jackpot Bowling League.)

“WHERE IS Dickey BOY JR.?”

“I THINK I going down there and burn da friggin’ building down,” Richard Pimente said to his wife Jackie, setting down the Saturday morning paper on the breakfast table. He had browsed over the baseball box scores without paying attention to whether his favorite teams had won or not. “Is one real eye sore. All dat graffiti on da side wall.”

“Why you so concerned about all that?” Jackie said. She stirred the cream into her third cup of coffee. “You never was before. Did you tell Darren and Micah that breakfast is ready?”

“Yeah, but is different now.”

“What is different?”

“Because—because—” He reopened the newspaper, searching for a good excuse. “Because how da hell Ching going sell da property to da Mama Mason outfit if get all dis kine vandalism all over da building?”

“Ching already signed it over to the restaurant. And any- way, since when you started getting cozy with Ching? I thought you hated his guts. Eh, where are those kids? Playing Nintendo so early in the morning? Did you call them for breakfast?”

“No. But I jus’ no can stand dat sneaky old pâkê,” said the former high-school star lineman. He shook his head, set the newspaper to the side, and sipped his coffee.

Years before marrying Ching, Clarissa Lee had been Richard Pimente’s sweetheart, though Clarissa’s parents dis- proved of him. And when Clarissa, the head song leader of the Wilson High School Warriors, had to leave school three
months before graduating, Hiram Ching, twelve years her senior, agreed to marry her, but with the ironclad stipulation that the baby had to be put up for adoption.

The couple was silent for a minute, Richard going back to his newspaper and Jackie staring into space.

“Honey, who you think is putting up all those signs?” Jackie asked.

Richard put down his newspaper. “You asking me? I dunno. But I sure as hell would like to know. I string da buggah up so fast if I find out, faster den he can say ‘I nevah do it.’”

It pained Clarissa Ching to hear rumors about how bad her son was. She knew he wasn’t born a bad egg. It just wasn’t fair that everyone in the community had written him off even when he was just a little boy. And it pained her more that it had been impossible for her to take care of him when he needed it the most. She had seen how the Humphreys, that childless, elderly haole couple, schoolteachers for many years at Wilson High, were not suited to the raising of children. They were too strict; they refused to feed him when he was bad; and they punished him severely when he peed in his bed. Their abusive tendencies were so widely known that Father Rosehill from the Catholic parish had visited them at least twice, even though the Humphreys were Congregationalists, and pleaded them to be more tolerant of their son’s hyperactivity. And through this all, Clarissa was unable to come to her son’s rescue, for the agreement that had been made was the Humphreys would adopt the baby only if Clarissa never exposed herself as the boy’s true mother. Though she hated the Humphreys and herself for making that promise, Clarissa was a woman of her word, and this hurt her terribly.

“You know, all dis is very, very strange,” Matt Goo was saying to Freddie Tanaka at Freddie’s service station, which was
just a traffic light down from the theater. The two men were sitting on the removed back seat of a '69 Dodge Dart set in the front of the station. Freddie was listening with his short, hairy arms folded, the fingers of his right hand rubbing the left elbow. “You know, all dis business dey putting da blame on Kalani Humphrey. I tell you fo’ one plain fact, da Humphrey boy is in jail. And one nada fact—”

“Try wait,” Freddie Tanaka interrupted, unfolding his arms. “I get one customer.” Freddie went out to the pumps and filled up the gas tank of a tourist car. Upon returning, he said, “What you was saying again?”

“I dunno. What I was saying?”

“About da Humphrey boy. You think he not da one who doing all dis.”

“Yeah. I no think he doing all dis. How can? Fo’ one, he in jail. And fo’ one nada fact, how he know all dis stuff he putting up on da wall?”

Freddie nodded his head in agreement. He chased a fly off his arm. “Then who you think da buggah doing all dis, then?” Freddie asked.

Matt sipped a can of soda. “I dunno. Maybe is da ghost haunting da moviehouse.”

Freddie switched his rubbing to the other elbow. “Could be,” he said.

It was a well known fact that a ghost—or something—was or had been living in the theater. The old-timers pointed to the fact that the theater had been foolishly constructed next to an ancient Hawaiian pathway to a heiau. Some said that the ghost was the spirit of Casey Akana, coming back to haunt Hiram Ching, whose father had bankrupted him and thus forced him to sell the theater at a loss.

“If I was Ching,” Matt said, “I wouldn’t knock down da building.”

“Why?”

“’Cause if I was him, I no like die.”

“Whachu mean?”

Matt Goo shook his head slowly. “If he break down the
building, maybe da ghost might . . .” Matt didn’t have to finish the sentence; Freddie was nodding his head in agreement. Then he got up with the arrival of another tourist car.

It was becoming a community habit—or rather, passion—to visit the theater’s wall on a daily basis. It was becoming, for many of the residents, a kind of daily bulletin board of gossip. For every day—no miss—a new quip of scandal would be painted on the wall. It was becoming customary to drive by there, even if it was out of the way, to see the latest news of the unexpected. And it was becoming acerbically amusing for the others to witness what the backstabbing messages were doing to the marital stability of those individuals selected as targets, though deep down inside each and every resident who had not as yet been elected for representation was the fear that perhaps the next time around his or her name might grace the wall.

A small group from the bowling league became so concerned with the lambasting that they decided to organize a twenty-four-hour vigil at the theater. Their stated intention was to catch the vandals, because “all they want to do is make trouble fo’ our town.” Of course, the real reason behind the forming of the group was to contain any further disruption that would threaten the stability of their organization. One of their own, Paul Navarro, had been exposed. It would be only a matter of time, if this was allowed to continue, that the unstated purpose of the group for a significant minority of its members—that of providing an alibi for their extramarital activities—would be exposed.

So they organized an around-the-clock watch one weekend, divided into four-hour shifts, with the robust determination to nab the troublemaking sign-maker. Tiny Vierra, all 267 pounds of him, pulled the first evening shift on the Friday, from 6:00 to 10:00, sitting in the darkness of his parked pickup across the street from the wall. And everything went well during Claudio Yoon’s 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. slot; the
watch was as quiet as the man himself. (As a fine example of the group, Claudio was not the cheating type. To be exact, he had no one to cheat on.) And things were going routine for Henry Kila—up to the time he dozed off for a few minutes, an hour before the end of his shift. Quintin Lee arrived for his shift forty-five minutes early to talk story with his good friend, bringing along fast-food breakfast and coffee, and noticed Henry snoring and a freshly painted sign gleaming and dripping from the wall. Silently he read the sign, then began laughing loudly, then cursing after dropping one extra large coffee (he had bought four) on his foot. Henry was wakened by Quintin’s painful, unholy deprecations to the gods of defecation and jumped to attention. The off-duty firefighter habitually grabbed for his pants and boots before realizing where he was.

“Whas so funny,” a dopey Henry asked, scratching his head, “and whas wit’ da racket? Gimme one coffee.”

“I thought you was supposed to be watching da place?”

“So I wen nod out fo’ couple minutes. So what?”

“Couple minutes?! Couple minutes is couple minutes, brah. Couple minutes was enough fo’ dis. Look.” Quintin pointed to the new sign and began laughing.

Henry read the sign out loud. “HIRAM CHING JAGS OFF IN HIS OFFICE WITH HIS DIRTY BOOKS.” A smile came to Henry’s chunky face and he laughed guardedly with Quintin. Then he was quiet. A concerned look came to his face, and he aspirated a sour “Shit.”

“Whas dah mattah?” Quintin asked.

“Eh, brah. Dis sign gotta come down. Right now. Dis sign no mo’ . . . taste.”

“Hah? Whas wrong wit’ dis?”

Henry shuffled his feet. He looked up at the sign, the whites of his eyes reddened and wide and begging with a simple innocence. “Stuff like dis . . . is private. No man in his right mind wants da world to know he whacking off on da side.”

“But everybody jag off. Whas so secret ’bout dis?”
“Dis not moral, not in good taste.”

Quintin looked hard at Henry, who was now regarding the sign with a strained expression, as if he was becoming more and more emotionally attached to it. Quintin was about to say something about the morality of Henry’s extramarital activities since the birth of his third daughter, but decided against it. It wasn’t the time and place to argue with a disturbed Henry Kila, who was known for his slow-burning fuse and a fist that could break burning bricks in half. “Yeah, maybe you right,” Quintin conceded. “But what we going do?”

Henry silently went to the wall and touched the fresh paint with a fingertip, then sniffed the tainted finger. “Oil paint,” he said to no one. “Who use oil-base in dis day and age?”

Quintin touched and smelled, too. “Smell like old paint.”

“And da buggah use da same kine all over.” Henry scanned the wall of graffiti.

“At least da buggah wen spell da names right.” Quintin broke into a laughter that was quickly suppressed when Henry suggested what they must do. “What?” Quintin protested. “How da hell we going do dat? Da sun coming up already.”

“Den we gotta work fast. Go call Dennis come down with da stepladder. And Val. Tell him bring some oil paint and brush. You go home and get what you get. Me . . . I stay down here and try cover up.” Henry was already trying to smear the tacky paint with his hands, though the paint was already being absorbed into the pores of the wall.

Within a half hour, the gang was repainting the wall, covering all the graffiti. It took them an hour to paint over every bit. But somehow, the most recent message had already leaked out of their circle and had spread through the community grapevine, and a good laugh, as well as a singular degree of pathos, was had by most of the community.

Henry’s spontaneous plan to vanquish all the graffiti didn’t last too long. Approximately twenty-four hours later,
during Dennis Umeda’s shift, the sign-maker broke through Dennis’s watchdog defense. So jolting to Dennis was the content of the message (now painted in black on white) that he thought he was going to have a heart attack. When he recovered from the shock and the heartburn, he limped off to the pay telephone across the street and called Watson Kamei, who was to relieve him. “Come down now,” Dennis said tersely.

“But it only five o’clock,” Watson whined, yawning in the phone. “I still get one hour mo’.”

“Come down now,” Dennis demanded, then hung up.

He waited at the phone booth until he saw Watson’s monstrous black four-wheeler trundle to a stop next to his Toyota. Watson had his engine on for nearly a full minute, the headlights of the truck switched to high, lighting up the wall. Finally, he killed the engine and got out. Dennis called from the booth, and Watson crossed the street.

“Whas da meaning of dat?” Watson whispered. “Who did dat?”

“You . . . asking me?”

“You wen fall asleep, too?”

Dennis shook his head. Watson noticed the slight trembling of Dennis’s hand, which was still clutching the hung receiver.

“Nah, all dis gotta be part of one big fucking joke,” Watson said, smiling as wide as his sleep-stiffened cheeks could give.

Dennis nodded his head. “But what should we do?”

Watson stuffed his hands all the way in the pockets of his blue jeans, rubbing the sides of his testicles. “We gotta go paint ’em over. Das what we gotta do.”

Dennis agreed. But before they could cross the street, a sleek white car whizzed by, slowing to check the bulletin board. Though it was moonless and the incandescent light from the streetlamp feeble, the message was brazened by the bleak whiteness of the freshly painted wall: “HIRAM CHING IS
TO DIE.” The car stopped, its radiating brake lights gripping the mute, watching men, then sped away.

“Who—dat?” Watson gasped after realizing that he had momentarily stopped breathing. They crossed the street. “You saw who . . . was dat?”

“Was Clarissa Ching,” Dennis said. Then he jumped in his car and drove off.