HERE WAS ONCE A SACRED BREADFRUIT tree growing in old Hawai‘i. Though it looked like an ordinary tree, it was actually a god, endowed with mana, the power to do extraordinary things. But it grew as other trees do, tall and proud, its big green leaves moving this way and that in the gentle trade winds. Many branches hung heavy with fruit, called ‘ulu, which were almost the size and shape of a man’s head.

An observant eye might notice that there was something unusual about this tree, for it grew alone in a small, circular clearing. Nearby plants bowed slightly in deference toward it. But no human knew that this breadfruit tree was sacred . . . except for one young woman named Papa.

The sound of waves breaking against coral and lava sang out to Papa, as she sat in the shade plaiting lau hala, the dried leaves of the pandanus tree. She lived on a ridge over Kalihi Valley with her husband, Wakea, who had gone into the valley to
collect bananas. While Papa worked on new sleeping mats, the song of the sea tickled her imagination, filling her mind with many images.

She pictured the frothy waters left by the surf, undulating like the shadows on the fine mat she was plaiting. The delicate tips of the long, thin leaves she wove wafted in the breeze. They reminded her of the limu, the water plants growing on rocks around the tide pools, waving softly in the water. She watched her hands move like busy little crabs.
With every crashing breaker, Papa found it harder to concentrate on her plaiting. She could think only of the treasures that beckoned in the waters below.

“If I am quick,” she thought, “I can fetch a delicious surprise for Wakea and be back to my plaiting before he even returns!” Although excited, she was careful to wrap the loose wefts of the mat in round bundles so they wouldn’t become tangled. Then she quickly rose and ran down the mountain trail toward the sea with her empty calabash ready to be filled.

The sun through the leaves made speckles of shadow and light on the hard soil beneath Papa’s feet as she darted down the rocky path. “Aloha, ‘i‘iwi!” she cried to a little red bird whose squeaky voice reached her from a nearby ʻōhi’a tree growing alongside the trail. She spied him hanging upside down from a branch, his long, curved beak buried deep within a spiky red lehua blossom.

Papa finally emerged from the green shadows of the forest. The sun greeted her with a multitude of brilliant jewels spread across the surface of the sea. She stepped slowly onto the warm rocks and sand, catching her breath at the beauty around her.

Then she hurried to the tide pools and started collecting limu. She was careful not to disturb the water too much lest she frighten the crabs away into hiding places within the rock crevices. “Ah, these crabs will make a fine meal for Wakea and me!” She plucked one with dexterous fingers from the clear water. Then another and another, until soon the calabash was brimming with her catch. “Now, home I go!” she exclaimed, and disappeared once more into the forest.

Papa carried the full calabash with ease as she made her way up the steep, winding trail. She smiled, imagining the look of surprise on Wakea’s face when he discovered her bounty.
At a freshwater spring along the way, she stopped to clean the crabs and limu. With cupped hands, she took a deep drink of the cool water. Suddenly, a movement on the mountainside across the valley caught her eye, and Papa squinted through the branches and leaves. She saw a group of men struggling, clutching at someone whose arms were tied behind his back. By their rough handling of this prisoner, she knew the crime must have been serious and that his punishment would be severe.

Suddenly she cried, “Wakea!” The prisoner was her husband! He must have unknowingly taken bananas from the patch that belonged to Leleho‘omao, the ruling chief of the area, notorious for his selfishness and cruelty. Papa leaped up, and the delicate flowers fell from the morning glory vine she wore as a skirt. The crabs and plants flew out of her calabash to the ground all around her as she frantically ran down into the valley.

“I must reach them before they hurt or kill Wakea!” she told herself, and urged her feet to move faster. Her heart pounded sharply when she lost sight of them. She must get there in time!

She rushed around a tangled cluster of hau trees, covered with bright yellow flowers, opened wide like watchful eyes. On the other side of the thicket, she found herself in front of Wakea and his captors and stopped abruptly.

“Please, let me at least say good-bye to my husband!” Papa pleaded to the men, and they were so startled by her sudden appearance that they nodded their assent.

She grabbed Wakea and held him in a wild embrace. Spinning him round and round, she moved him quickly to a small, circular clearing where a breadfruit tree grew in the center. She pushed Wakea up against the trunk, which opened up wide and then instantly closed around them, the pair disappearing within it.
Dumbfounded, the men rushed up to the tree, grabbing at its trunk and searching through its branches and leaves for the couple. They investigated the surrounding area in angry confusion, but the prisoner and the woman were nowhere to be found. “It is the breadfruit tree!” exclaimed one of the men. “They are hiding inside the trunk. We must chop it down!”

He began hacking at the tree with his stone axe. Bits of bark and wood flew out in all directions. The man shrieked in surprise and pain as the flying chips cut sharply into his flesh, the splattering sap burning and melting away his skin. In agony, he fell to the ground, dead.

The others watched with eyes wide in disbelief, and another man leaped forward, chopping furiously at the trunk of the tree. But he too was struck with the killing wood chips and sap, and quickly fell in a mangled heap beside the first man.

The rest of the men backed away in horror. “We must tell our chief about this tree,” said one, and they hurried off to find him.

Chief Leleho’omao was dubious as he listened to the story of the couple’s escape. Although he was cruel and selfish, he was not stupid, and he decided that before doing anything, it would be best to consult the kahuna, the priest.

After hearing the story, the kahuna sat thinking for a while. He eventually raised his head, nodded slowly, and then spoke. “The tree is sacred,” he told the chief, “and offerings must be made. Lay coconut and an ʻawa root before it, a black pig and some red fish. Before approaching the tree, rub your body well with the oil from a coconut for protection. If you do all that I have told you, then you shall be able to safely cut down this tree.”
And so Chief Leleho'omao and his men brought their offerings to the sacred breadfruit tree, their bodies glistening from head to toe with coconut oil. Hiding his fear, the chief stepped forward with his ax swinging. The other men hesitated, remembering the gruesome scene of the previous day, and watched from a safe distance. As the chief hacked at the tree, they saw he was immune to the flying splinters and sap. They all joined their chief with triumphant cries, and soon the great tree fell. Together, they cleaved the thick trunk until it finally split in two. But where they expected to see their prisoner and his wife, they found solid wood.
Meanwhile, Papa and Wakea had returned to their home, magically transported by the sacred breadfruit tree. Wakea promised Papa that he would be more careful from then on, picking only the fruit from wild groves.

Back in the forest, where Papa’s calabash had spilled, the *limu* took root on rocks in the little spring, and there it grows today. The crabs that had scurried from her calabash found new homes in the pool of fresh water where Papa had enjoyed a cool drink. Along the path where Papa ran, wild blue morning glory vines had begun to grow from seeds that had fallen from her skirt that day, the day she saved Wakea, with help from the protective spirit within the sacred breadfruit tree.
Notes on the ‘Ulu

Kū and Hina are the great ancestral god and goddess of Hawai‘i. The original male and female powers of heaven and earth, they ruled over the fruitfulness of the land and the people. Kū was recognized as the god from whom all gods and people came, and every Hawaiian who lived in the ancient world felt his protection.

Kū was associated with male activities. Early gods of the land and sea were given “Kū” names, and men worshiped the particular Kū god who presided over their profession. There were gods for farming, fishing, war, canoe building, and sorcery, with names like Kūka‘ie‘ie, Kū'ula, Kūkā‘ilimoku, Kūpulupulu, and Kūwahailo.

The word kū in Hawaiian means “rising upright, straight,” and the breadfruit tree was called ‘ulu kū, or “upright breadfruit.” Ulu means “to grow, increase, and spread.” To the ancient Hawaiians, Kū was the symbol of abundance and so was the breadfruit tree, a kino lau, or body form of Kū. Aside from the nutritional value of ‘ulu, the breadfruit tree had many other uses. The trunk made fine surfboards, hula drums, and parts for canoes and houses. The young buds were used as medicine, the inner bark for making kapa, or beaten cloth. The sap was used as a caulking material and also smeared on certain tree branches to snare birds in the forest. The birds’ valuable feathers were collected to make the cloaks for the ali‘i, the chiefs. In more modern times, ‘ulu wood was used to make furniture, and the dried buds were burned, the smoke acting as an insect repellent.

According to legend, the first ‘ulu to reach Hawai‘i was brought by a man living in Waipi‘o named Kaha‘i. He voyaged by canoe to his ancestors’ ancient homeland in kahiki (the name for a foreign land) and brought back the ‘ulu, which he
planted at Pu'uloa in 'Ewa, a sacred area on the southwest coast of O'ahu. The actual date of the breadfruit tree’s arrival to Hawai'i is uncertain, but many clues point to some time after the fourteenth century. The place of origin is thought to be Malaysia; from there it spread to the southern islands of Polynesia and then to Hawai'i.

The breadfruit does not often reproduce from seeds but from shoots growing at the base of the tree. Early Hawaiians described ‘ulu with the expression ‘ai kameha'i, meaning it is food that reproduces itself “by the will of the gods.” To transplant a sucker, one must cut the parent root at just the right place, keeping a ball of soil intact around the root. The root must be planted carefully in rich, dark soil, not sand or cinder, then mulched and watered frequently in order for the progeny to survive and flourish. Considering the difficulty of this procedure, the success that early voyagers had with transplanting the ‘ulu is almost as magical as the legends themselves.