



Wahine O Ka Hoe

by
M.E. Troy

The rough water canoe race across the treacherous Molokai Channel culminated months of practice for the women paddlers. Death made the waters rougher.

There were six of us in the canoe, all *wahine*, stabbing and pulling in unison as Leilani Fo, in the strokes bow seat, pounded out the pace. The craft throbbed with each punch of the paddles -- seventy-two throbs per minute. The canoe was alive, sensing, surging ahead as our paddles ripped the sea.

The sea was alive, too. It was a tossing, lurching jumble of crossing forces -- trade winds from the East and long northerly swells. Oahu was a low cloudy shape up ahead. Also ahead were the women of Outrigger Canoe Club, but we were gaining on them -- small gains, measured in seconds, with every rip of the paddles. No time for talk. Just gasp and dig and pull your weight. A swell angled in from the stern and lifted the boat. For no more than a heartbeat we were

balanced on the crest, forty-four feet and fourteen hundred pounds of fiberglass and women. "Dig! Now!" yelled Leilani. My paddle bit air on one stroke and water on the next and we howled together as we drove down the blue slope.

The support boat churned past, giving us a wide berth on the port side. It carried three teammates, extra paddles and Bruce Scanron, our coach. The support boat disappeared into a trough while we surfed another swell, the highest one yet. The canoe shot down its face like a runaway ore train and our yells became fearsome shrieks. Up ahead, the support boat had dropped the relief crew in the water. Their heads, under their colorful caps, bobbed in the swells about twenty yards apart. Melissa, the steerswoman in back, yelled, "Teri, Val, Holly! Change!"

We dropped down the face of another wave and suddenly Holly's relief ducked under the *iako*, the outrigger struts, and appeared by the canoe. Holly gave up her seat just as my relief appeared. I abandoned my paddle while, ahead of me, Teri prepared to do the same. My relief hauled herself in over the port side and I flopped out the other. The canoe seemed to lurch as I let it go.

At first I couldn't find the escort boat when I surfaced, but then a swell lifted me up and I saw it, making a tight turn back to get me.

The canoe was also turning. Something had gone wrong. Teri was still paddling in the third seat. Another swell lifted me and I had a quick glimpse of a pink and lime colored cap as it disappeared under the waves about twenty yards ahead.

Holly swam to my side. She had seen the cap, too. "My God! It's Nani," she said. Together, we struck out for the spot in the water where we had last seen her, but the support boat got there first. I still had half the distance to go when Bruce plunged into the water and brought Nani's limp form to the surface.

Even he wasn't in time.

Nani had suffered a massive blow to the left side of her head, lost consciousness, or the ability to help herself, and drowned. The Medical Examiner speculated that the prow of the canoe rammed her while she waited to climb aboard. He guessed that a rogue wave had hit the canoe. Several others had felt the same lurch of the craft that I had felt as I flopped out.

I didn't see any of the team for a whole day after the accident. Teri called the second evening after the race.

"I have to talk," she said.

Me, too. For two days I'd felt like a subject in an isolation experiment, out of touch with even

my own feelings. I drove to Teri's apartment.

We hugged and Teri got out glasses and wine. Then came the inevitable question.

"How could it happen, Val?"

Melissa is the best steerswoman on the water. She could steer a canoe through a button hole."

"In that sea?"

"In any sea."

"Did you see Nani get hit?"

"No. She went under a swell.

I thought she'd come up under the *iako* and then I'd make the flop. But she never did. I looked and I saw her looking up at me just underneath the surface. But she wasn't moving and she was outside the *ama*."

The *ama* is the outrigger float. It's held out from the hull of the canoe by the pair of *iako*.

"Outside the *ama*? I'd have thought she'd be closer to the canoe if she'd just been hit by it."

Teri shrugged. "I guess she was caught by the same wave that hit us. God, Val! I feel terrible for Bruce."

I nodded. It was no secret among a team who shared eight months of sweat and pain that Nani and Bruce had been lovers. "I feel terrible for Melissa," I said. "I hope she can get her confidence back."

I woke up the next morning with a massive hangover and a

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purple tongue from Teri's wine. About noon, I called Melissa who agreed to meet me at a Chinese place for noodles.

Of the women on the team, Melissa is the prettiest. She has a heart-shaped face, large brown eyes, and smooth, luminous skin. I would sell my reproductive rights for her skin. On this day, she was anything but pretty. Her skin was blotchy and her eyes had dark crescents under them. Her cheeks looked hollow.

"How are you doing?" I asked after we sat down.

"Not good, but who is? I haven't slept. Have you?"

"I've been unconscious."

"I wish I were," she said.

"Nani was my best friend. I killed her."

"Melissa, listen to me. It wasn't your fault. The sea was rough, very rough. Nobody could keep control in those waves."

"But that's just it, Val. I had control. Once the girls were in the water, I held the line."

"What about the rogue wave?"

"It was just a small wave and I corrected for it."

"Are you sure?"

"I've lain awake for the better part of two nights now seeing it. Yes, I'm sure."

"Tell me exactly what you saw."

Melissa stared over my shoulder, collecting her thoughts, then she said, "I had the line. Nani was in the water on the port side where she was supposed to be. From my position I could only see the top of her cap, but that was all I needed. You flopped out and a wave hit us on the starboard side. I had to fight the steering paddle. I could feel the prow lift and then dig into the water."

"So you didn't actually see it hit Nani."

"No."

"And if you held the line, how did she get in the way?"

"A wave could have pushed her into our path."

"But that would have had to have come from the opposite direction of the wave that hit the canoe. And then a third wave would have come from a third direction because, when Teri saw her, she was outside the *ama*. It doesn't seem possible, does it?"

Melissa's eyes glistened with tears. "I don't know, Val," she said. "But I held the line."

The waiter brought our food. I dug into my plate of noodles but Melissa only picked at hers. She said, "Did you know Nani was planning to leave Bruce?"

"No," I said.

"She was. For a woman."

"Who?"

“Does it matter now?”

“I guess not,” I said. Then, as an afterthought, “Was it you?”

She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I know you are. Val, do you still have Nani’s cap?”

“Yes.” I’d reached the escort boat in time to help Bruce lift Nani aboard. He and I worked fruitlessly to resuscitate her. When it became obvious that there was no more hope, I cradled her head in my lap and held her for the trip back. After we’d reached shore and her body was taken away, I discovered I had her cap. Not wanting to discard it, I took it back to my apartment.

“I’d like to have it, if that’s all right with you. It will help to remember her.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll bring it by.”

After leaving Melissa, I went to my office and called the other team members. By early evening, I’d talked to each of them. Not one of them had actually seen the canoe hit Nani.

At seven I headed back to my apartment. I found Bruce sitting by my front door, his back against it and his eyes closed. He opened his eyes at the sound of my footsteps.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” he said. “I thought you might want

some dinner.”

“I’ve been working,” I said.

“Working? Ah yes, the investigation business. Val Lyon, Private Eye.”

Any suggestion that someone on the team had a professional life outside the canoe always surprised Bruce. His reaction on those occasions seemed more like jealousy than curiosity. Maybe that was to be expected from someone who’d exhorted, enticed and nudged us into a team over eight months of twice-daily practices. Before, we were a bunch of athletic women; now we were *wahine o ka hoe*, women of the paddle. As a team, we were Bruce’s creation. Sometimes, we were entirely his.

He got up and stood aside while I unlocked the door. As it swung open he slid his arms around me. I raised my face to him and let him kiss me. His tongue probed my lips, insistently, but I pulled away.

“Hey! Why are you so cold?” he asked, following me into the apartment.

“It’s not a good time for this, Bruce. You know why. I feel like I’m betraying Nani.”

“C’mon, Val. We’ve been over this ground. It was over between me and Nani before you and I ever started.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“You know I didn’t. We

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agreed I'd wait until after the race."

"You agreed. I don't remember being asked."

"Val, this is hard on everybody. Can we drop it for the time being? I don't feel good about the way it turned out, either. I wish I'd been up front with her instead of sneaking around behind her back."

In fact, we hadn't done that much sneaking. We'd gone out together only five times. We hadn't slept together until the third time. So far, our affair had been casual rather than serious. I knew all about his relationship with Nani, and I was not about to get serious with a man on the rebound.

I opened beers for both of us. Bruce took his to my couch while I busied myself unloading the dishwasher. I said, "Bruce, did you see the canoe hit Nani?"

"Hunh uh. I was watching Melissa to see how she handled it in those seas."

"Ten people," I said. "Right there at the same time and place and not one of them saw the canoe hit her."

"We were all looking at different things; we had different jobs to do."

"Did Melissa seem in control of the canoe?"

"Yeah, Melissa had control. Val, I haven't wanted to say this, but I think she had Nani in her sights."

"What are you saying, that Melissa murdered Nani, that she hit her deliberately?"

"Maybe she wanted to frighten her, I don't know. I only know that, if I were in an angry sea looking at a canoe bearing down on me, I would want Melissa steering. Unless I'd pissed her off."

"Melissa was pissed at Nani?"

"You know Melissa's orientation." It was a statement, not a question. "Nani rejected her. 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' and all that, regardless of sexual preference."

"Nani told you that?" The last of the dishes were put away. I picked up Nani's cap from the counter where it had been since the accident. It had a big brownish-red stain on the left side.

"Yeah. She was afraid to be alone with Melissa."

Bruce joined me in the kitchen. He noticed the cap in my hand. "Nani's?" he asked.

"I was going to wash it." Besides the blood stain, there were a few strands of hair stuck to the material. I picked them off and laid them reverently on a paper napkin. Turning the cap over in my hand, I felt something sharp poke my finger. On close look, it was a narrow wood splinter sticking through the fabric.

"What's that?" he asked.

“I don’t know.” I put the cap back on the counter. “I can’t do this, right now.”

He put his arms around my shoulders. “Then leave it. Let me take you to dinner. After that we can go to my place and I’ll make you forget all of this.”

I pecked him on the cheek and pushed him away. “Not now, Bruce. I need to deal with this myself. Give me a couple days.” I pushed him towards the door. His face darkened and he started to protest, but I kissed him full on the mouth. “Trust me, Bruce. I’ll call you.” I shut the door behind him.

Something he’d said stuck in my mind. “If I were in an angry sea looking at a canoe bearing down on me,” he’d said. If she was looking at the canoe, then how could it strike her on the left side?

I called each of the team and told them I believed Nani had been murdered. I also told them where I would be. At nine o’clock I drove to the Hawaii Yacht Club marina.

When it was clear that nothing could be done for Nani, we had dropped out of the race and sailed to the yacht club with the canoe in tow. Like zombies, we had gone through the motions of putting the canoe in the shed and berthing the support boat. To my knowledge, nobody had been back since.

The support boat rocked at its mooring. It was a sport fisherman with plenty of room for all of the gear we’d need in the race -- medical supplies, replacement fluids, four extra paddles. A blue tarp covered the cockpit. I lifted a corner and crawled underneath and swung my flashlight around. The paddles were stacked neatly alongside the port gunwales, their varnished blades reflected the light back at me. If I was right, one of them was the weapon that had killed Nani. The wood splinter in her cap could not have come from an impact with a fiberglass hull; it could only have come from a paddle.

Holding the flashlight in my teeth, I examined each paddle blade in the light and ran my hand over the edges. They were perfectly smooth. There wasn’t a nick or splinter on any of them. I was sure the splinter in Nani’s cap had come from one of them. How could I have been so wrong? I sat back on my heels and looked at the three paddles again. Three! One paddle was missing.

Suddenly something heavy slammed my shoulder through the tarp. I heard a sharp crack, as of a bone breaking, and felt a searing pain. I screamed and fell onto my face on the deck. The flashlight rolled up against the gunwale. My right arm was numb, my shoulder felt as though it had been ripped

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from my body.

Through the veil of pain I heard Bruce shouting. "Whoever you are, you're trespassing. Come out now." The tarp came off and Bruce was silhouetted against the night sky.

"Oh! Val, is that you?" His voice had a tone of mock surprise. He held up a canoe paddle. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, threatening. "Is this the one you're looking for?"

I pulled myself into a sitting position against the bulkhead. A wave of agony passed over me; my right arm hung useless. Even if I could get a paddle, I couldn't swing it effectively.

Bruce said, "I knew you suspected me when you found that splinter."

"You weren't going to leave her, were you?" I said through gritted teeth.

"Why should I?"

"Of course, why should you? You could have it all -- Nani, me, the team." I tried to pull myself up higher against the bulkhead to take some of the pressure off my injured arm. My hand brushed against something hard and cylindrical. The fire extinguisher. I said, "Have you slept with anyone else on the team?"

"Val, we don't have to do this. You could forget everything you know. Nani's death was a tragic

accident. Melissa might go through a tough period under suspicion, but it won't amount to anything. You and me could go on as we were."

"For how long? Until I decide to leave, too? When did she tell you she was leaving you?"

"The night before the race at Hale O Lono Harbor."

The pain was enough to keep me alert. I eased the fire extinguisher out of the clips, hoping he wouldn't see in the darkness, covering the noise with talk. "So you stewed on it all night -- how *dare* she leave you -- and when the canoe was out of sight and the other girls were in the water you seized the chance. You were lucky, Bruce. One of the girls could have seen you or the boat captain could have turned around. Then you had to make sure it was you who went to her rescue. Was she alive when you reached her, Bruce? My guess is she was, but by then she couldn't struggle."

"She didn't. I don't think you'll be able to struggle much, either. We're running out of time, Val. Make your decision. I promise, we can go on as we were, but you have to forget all this. It's up to you."

"I don't have much choice, do I? I'm hurt Bruce. I need help."

He lowered the paddle and stepped into the cockpit. As he reached out to me, I raised the fire

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extinguisher and blasted it into his face. I followed it with a kick to his mid-section and he staggered back, into the arms of Teri and Holly who had quietly come onto the dock behind him. The rest of the team were there, too. They held Bruce for the police and called an ambulance for me.

“Women of the paddle stick together,” I heard Teri say as I passed out.

-- THE END --

M. E. Troy, formerly of Hawaii, now living in Texas, prefers skydiving to canoeing as a respite from the terrors of the blank page.

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