My Name is Loa

A story of Exile, Adventure, and Romance on the Island of Moloka'i

Written by
Dorothea N. Buckingham

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Introduction

In the mid-1800s Hansen's disease, an illness once known as leprosy, became epidemic in Hawai'i. Some people said the Chinese brought the sickness to the islands, a few missionaries said it was a plague from God, and there were several doctors who claimed it was the fourth stage of syphilis.

Leprosy is a disfiguring disease, and in those days it was always fatal. In Europe during that time, Hansen's disease patients were isolated from the public—put in special hospitals. But in Hawai'i the idea of separating the sick from their families was against the most basic of Hawaiian values.

Leprosy touched everyone. By the late 1800s one of every thirty-nine Hawaiians was effected by the disease. A Lahaina relative of Queen Emma was one of the first to be diagnosed, later so

was her father. And Peter Ka'eo, her cousin, was even sent to Moloka'i for a time.

No one knew what caused leprosy or how it was spread. The fear of contagion spread and suspicions grew. As more people died, the movement to isolate the sick gained popularity. Ministers quoted the Bible to support banishing them. Honolulu politicians warned about the cost of treating them. Frightened families with sick members began leaving the cities and hiding in the mountains. But still, there was a resistance to round up those who were ill.

Then, in 1865, only months after he ascended the throne, King Kamehameha V (Lot) approved an Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy. By this act persons with Hansen's disease were isolated.

Originally, land in the Pālolo Valley on O'ahu was set aside as a confinement settlement. But when Makiki residents protested about the possible contamination of their water supply, an off-O'ahu site was named. The land finally chosen for the settlement was a remote peninsula on Moloka'i.

Over the course of the next thirty years, tens of thousands of people were diagnosed with the disease. Most were sent to Moloka'i. The chosen site was on a flat piece of land formed at the base of the Moloka'i cliffs. It is a forbidding place. It protrudes into the ocean, unprotected from wind and rain and encircled by cliffs that block out the sun.

Conditions at the settlement changed with the arrival of Father Damien DeVeuster in May 1873. Damien tried to establish moral order. He taught Christian values, tended to the sick, built them homes, repaired existing buildings, made coffins, dug graves, and prayed the prayers for the dead. He also drew the attention of the Hawaiian royalty to the needs of the patients. In 1881 Lili'uokalani, then a Princess of Hawai'i, visited Kalaupapa and met Father Damien. In 1884 she returned as Queen.

When Damien died in April 1889 there were others who continued his work including the Sacred Hearts brothers and priests, Mother Marianne Kopp, and the Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis. Among those who remained was a layman named Ira Dutton. Damien called him Brother Joseph.

Before he died Damien saw the building of the Bishop Home for Girls and the Baldwin Home for Boys, dormitories that were established because so many of the patients were children. Bishop Home, at Kalaupapa, was under the care of Mother Marianne. Baldwin Home, on the opposite side of the peninsula, was under Joseph Dutton's care. By the early 1900s there were baseball leagues, boxing clubs, and acrobatic teams and a band.

My Name Is Loa is about a fifteen-year-old boy who was sent to Baldwin Home. It is not a true story. There is no record of a William Maka'ike Alaloa Ka'ai at Kalawao, but the description of his life at the settlement is true. The menu in the dining hall, the runaway bull, the escapes, the weddings, the funerals are all a matter of record.

In 1898, the year this story takes place, the Hawaiian islands were annexed to the United States, and in 1900, when Hawai'i was organized as a Territory of the United States, all persons who were citizens of the Republic of Hawai'i became citizens of both Hawai'i and the United States. The Annexation Commission's visit to Moloka'i described in this book is based on fact.

There are a few historical inaccuracies—the storm described in the book took place years earlier, and the stories about Brother Dutton are all fiction.

But for the most part you can believe what you read, if you remember, this is not a history book, this is Loa's story.

Chapter 1

The Disease That Tears Families Apart

Ma'i oka'a wale 'ohana

It looked a festive occasion. Horse-drawn carriages lined the dock and lei sellers sat on the sidewalk selling their wares. The Royal Band played, a church choir sang. There was even a representative from the Queen. Girls in long dresses with ribbons in their hair and boys in knickers ran through the crowd, while men in black suits and women in fine hats strolled hand-in-hand.

I had on my new gray suit. My brother, Keo, was in knickers. I remember the cuffs of my jacket scratching the back of my hand. I remember the coarseness of the wool and the smoothness of the satin lining.

It was late in the afternoon on Sunday, March 6, my shipment day. The smell of roasting pig and the stench of the harbor mixed with the sweet perfume of the flower lei. There were about twenty of us being shipped to Moloka'i that day. Most of us were men, a few were old women. There were two little girls, holding hands, clutching on to their cotton dolls.

I wasn't afraid, I was numb. I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I tried not to watch as the sun inched its way to the horizon. At sunset we would sail.

The *Mokoli'i's* captain ordered the gangplank to be lowered. It was getting harder not to be scared. The ship's winch screeched and the gangplank banged against the dock. The sheriff stood on an overturned crate and cleared his throat as he opened a manila folder marked "Patient Photos." He took out the photos and handed them to his waiting deputies. The deputies roamed through the crowd, matching the Board of Health photos with our faces.

The sun had almost set.

The ship's crew prodded the cattle up the gangplank. I kept my gaze on the cows, avoiding the deputy coming toward me. As he moved closer, I felt my father's hands on my shoulders. The deputy pressed a photo next to my cheek, then he moved on without a word.

The *Mokoli'i's* captain signaled the sheriff to begin boarding the patients. The sheriff put on his glasses and read the first name. "Ikaika Keale."

A woman screamed. The sheriff looked up. Two deputies were already moving toward Keale. The woman clung to Keale, pressing her body against his. A deputy grabbed her arm to pull her away.

"Leave her alone," Keale yelled.

The woman jabbed her elbow into the deputy and twisted away, but she wasn't strong enough to overpower him.

A boy, no more than eight, jumped up on the deputy's back, pounding him with punches. The first deputy raised his club and swung it at the boy.

"No!" Keale screamed. "Not my son!" There was a crack of the club. The boy fell to the dock, and the woman tore loose from the

deputy and kneeled to cradle the boy in her arms.

"'Aulani," Keale called the woman's name. "'Aulani, *aloha nō,*" he said. I love you.

The roll call continued. One after another women in long dresses and men in black suits climbed the gangplank of the Mokoli'i. The hull of the ship smashed against the dock. The march continued. Some of the patients boarded the ship looking straight ahead. They never turned back. Others were prodded like cattle.

What was at first just one or two voices crying out in grief was now a chorus. The great kanikau, the wailing of my people, filled the night. It drowned out the hymns of the choir and called on the gods for mercy.

Then I heard it, "William Maka'ike Alaloa Ka'ai."

My name.

"William Maka'ike Alaloa Ka'ai."

It was like a blow to my chest. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't hear. Everything stopped. A deputy headed toward me.

This can't be, I thought. This can't be.

My father took me into his arms and held me tight. His chest was heaving and I could hear him breathing. "Where is the justice, Jehovah?" he screamed. "Where is the justice?"

I saw the deputy's eyes—they were dead, gray eyes. I closed my eyes and let myself sink into my father's arms. I wanted Papa to hold me. I wanted him to save me, to hide me in the mountains, to fight off the deputies, to make life go back to what it was and make me clean again, like before the *lēpela.*

"Help me, Papa," I whispered.

You're my father, I thought. You are supposed to make things right.

He pressed my head to his chest, and I felt his tears on my hair.

Why didn't you hide me, Papa? I thought. Why didn't you take me to the mountains? You could have smuggled me to Kaua'i.

"Why didn't you take me to the mountains?" I whispered no louder than my breath.

"Help us, Jehovah!" Papa cried.

You didn't fight for me. You just gave me up.

Papa stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. He held my face in his hands. He opened his mouth to speak but no sound came out, only his gasping for air.

It was then that Mama stepped forward. She stood tall in front of me. Her hair was piled on her head in a bun and she was wearing a high-necked dress as black as her eyes. At her neck she wore an Italian cameo given to her by the Queen.

"Forgive me, son," she whispered.

"There's nothing to forgive," I said. But there was, and we both knew it. It was because of her blood that I got the *lēpela.* It was she who carried the Ka'eo blood—a royal blood line with a history of the disease.

I bowed my head as she placed a *maile* lei on my shoulder. She drew me close and I rested my head on her bosom. As I closed my eyes I remembered when I was a child, when she took me for picnics. Sometimes I would get too tired to walk, or get frightened by a mongoose, and she would pick me up in her arms and I would curl my legs around her waist and she would hold me tight and carry me back to the buggy.

I wanted her to carry me away now. I wanted her to beg the Queen for a favor.

Why didn't she? I thought.

I put my ear to my mother's chest and listened for the sound of her heart. I breathed in the musk of the *maile*, fresh from the mountains.

I'm afraid, Mama. Do you know that I'm afraid?

Her arms surrounded me.

"*Pau 'ole ke aloha,*" she said. Love never fails.

But it had failed—I was sailing for Kalaupapa. Mama let go of me, almost pushing me away. Tears rolled down her cheek, getting caught in the lines in her face. I wanted her to save me—but I knew I couldn't be saved.

I leaned down and kissed my brother Keo. Keo's body was thin, like mine, but his body was clean.

Why me? I thought. Of all of us in the family, why did this happen to me?

Keo looked up at me and smiled.

Who will protect you, Keo, if you get the *lēpela*? What will they do for you?

"I love you, brother," I said.

"I love you." He smiled.

Two Board of Health deputies flanked me and gripped my elbows. I shrugged them loose and slowly picked up my bag and walked toward the ship. As I walked, I looked down at my feet. I watched as they moved me closer to the ship. With each step I stared at them, as if they belonged to someone else, or had a will of their own.

This isn't real, I thought. Someone will come forward. Papa will break the line. The Queen's man will declare me free. Somehow I'll be saved.

I started up the gangplank, hearing the creak of my shoes on the planks, hearing the pounding of my heart, the waves lapping at the ship, the hiss of the engine, the squeal of the cables. Then, breaking above all else, I heard my mother's wail.

"Auē!" The sound of her grief.

"Auē!" The hymns.

"Auē!" The waves.

A chorus of mourning rose from the dock.

I ran to the ship's rail. "Mama!" I screamed.

Papa was holding her up. She was twisting and bending, forward and back. She reached out for me with her arms. Papa held her from behind. His eyes never left mine.

"Aloha, father," I whispered and kissed my hand and reached out as if I could touch him for one last time.

The *Mokoli'i* set sail.

I stood at the rail staring at them, trying to burn the sight of their faces in my mind. I wanted to hold them, I wanted this all to go away. But the *Mokoli'i* kept moving through the harbor, threading her way through tall ships and steamers.

My view of my parents was blocked. I ran up and down the rail trying to keep them in sight. I shoved my way through other patients. I craned my neck to see them.

Don't go away!

The wailing was lost in the sound of the ocean.

I stood at the rail staring at the pier. I never blinked. I squinted even in the dark. I stood there long after I couldn't see the dock, long after the ship rounded Lē'ahi and set course toward the channel.

From the ship I saw the fishermen's torches. They glittered on the waves, like stars that landed in the ocean.

What's going to happen to me? I thought.

I walked the deck to the farthest deck chair and covered myself with a blanket. I curled up as tight as I could and shoved some of the blanket in my mouth so no one would hear me cry.

What's going to happen to me?

I felt someone sit down beside me. I felt the weight of a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry," I heard a man's voice say. He rubbed my back and slowly lifted the blanket and tucked it under my chin. It was an old Hawaiian man. "It will be all right."

His forehead caught the light of the moon. He had a broad, square head. His ears were large and wrinkled and drooped lower than any I had ever seen.

"It will be all right," he said as he stroked my forehead. He was a dark-skinned man with kinky white hair that was cut close to his scalp.

"I'll watch out for you," he smiled. "And you can watch out for me."

I nodded and smiled back without thinking. I didn't know if I should be afraid of him. The man was barrel-chested and round-shouldered. The buttons on his shirt pulled open at his belly and the cuffs of his sleeves strained at his wrists.

"Look over there, boy," he pointed to a cluster of stars near the moon. "It's a good sign."

I didn't want to look at the stars or listen to some old man's lies. I didn't want to talk or smile. I wanted to cover myself up and be left alone.

The old man sat on the chair next to me, and I pulled my blanket over me and huddled under it with my back toward him. I laid

awake all night, twisting and turning on the wooden chair.

What's going to happen to me?

I tried not to look at the sky for a sign, but more than once I looked up at the stars and begged the gods to show me.

By the time Io, the morning star, had risen, the *Mokoli'i* was moored off the coast of Kalaupapa and there still was no sign from the gods.

The ship's crew threw the nets off our baggage.

A *haole* officer barked his orders to a young deck hand, "E, Manu. Start with *tūtū's* bags." The officer wagged his fingers over a canvas trunk.

"Pikela, Manu, get the boats ready," he said. And the long boats were unlashed and lowered over the side.

The old man who had spoken to me slowly woke up. He stretched and groaned and pulled his suspenders over his shoulders. He looked over to me and nodded. I nodded back.

He lumbered to the rail, shifting his weight from side to side, resting his hands on his back. He took a place in a line of the young deck hands who were passing trunks, wooden chests, sewing machines, rocking chairs, beds, and baggage—from man to man into the dangling long boat.

I watched the old man as he lifted a chest of drawers. His forearms were thick. His skin was leathered from sun. He had no sign of disease. His face was clean and his body was strong.

He walked off the line toward an old woman and guided her to the railing. He took her by the waist. He spoke to her softly, smiling and nodding, then he lifted her into the long boat.

Women and children were boarded first. The women in long dresses tied their skirts to their waists and climbed over the rail. Some of them were wearing bonnets with lace nets that swirled over their faces. One woman was all in black—a wide-brimmed hat, her *holokū* trimmed with lace, and a parasol that hung from her arm. She leaned over to the two little girls who stood in front of her and whispered to them and kissed the tops of their heads. The girls, still clutching their dolls, climbed into the longboat by themselves.

It was my time to board. I climbed into the third boat with the

men. I sat behind a crewman about my age. The old man sat next to me.

The *Mokoli'i's* crew lowered our boat. The rope slacked and there was a drop. The boat dangled—then a second drop bounced me off my seat. I scraped my back against the plank as I slid to the floor. The boat rocked, tossing me against the sides.

"Release!" a crewman shouted.

"Release," a boatman answered.

The long boat dipped. There was a third drop. Hot jolts of pain surged up my spine. The boat swayed.

"Release," was the call.

"Release ropes."

I got back on to my seat. The boat dropped and we plummeted into a wave. Water crashed in and the crewman in front of me was thrown into my lap. He grabbed on to my legs. My ribs slammed against the side of the boat. There was another swell and the boat pitched.

"Stroke!"

The crewman tried to climb back to his seat.

"Stroke!"

Another swell hurled the boat.

"Stroke!"

The crewman grabbed for his oar. The boat lurched into the break. We were caught in the curl of the wave. Water hissed and spewed.

"Stroke!"

We were surrounded by water. The crewman dug his oar deep. Waves slashed my face. My clothes were drenched. Crewmen were yelling. Oars collided.

"Stroke!"

Another wave came toward us.

"Stroke!"

It spewed us out broadside.

"Stroke!"

The boat pitched and reeled.

"Now!" a crewman yelled.

We careened up and plunged into the crest. The boat was righted and we rode out the wave. The yelling stopped, the strokes of the crew began to slow down, and soon there was order.

We survived, I thought. We survived.

With each stroke we moved closer to Kalaupapa. I could almost make out the landing. It looked like a small village in the shadow of the mountains. The Moloka'i cliffs rose out of the ocean like a thunderous wall of jagged ravines and cloud-covered peaks.

With every wave we lunged forward, stroke by stroke, closer to Moloka'i—*Moloka'i, nui 'ā hina.* Moloka'i, the gray. Moloka'i of the dead. Kalawao, the land of living corpses, the land with no law, the place to die. Its spirit reached out for me. It came out of the mist. It sought me out and choked my breath. It chilled me and covered me. It brought with it the stench of death—my death.

I'm going to die!

It seized my soul and surrounded my body. I wrapped my arms around my shoulders and dug my fingers into my bones. I rocked back and forth and threw back my head.

Moloka'i of the abandoned!

I shut my eyes and rocked.

I'm going to die!

My mouth opened wide. I rocked faster.

"Auē!" I screamed.

"Auē!"

Water gushed over me in angry torrents.

Just let go, I thought. Let the ocean have you.

A wave flooded in.

Let go, just let go.

I dropped my arms and let the wave pitch me out of the boat. But I was pulled back, the old man grabbed me.

Let me go! I begged him, but the words never came out.

"Boy!" He pulled me back by my jacket.

Please, let me go.

"Boy!" He took me and cradled me in his arms.

"Auē!"

The old man rocked me.

"Auē!"

I cried out to Jehovah. I cursed him and begged him for mercy. I cried out for my father and mother. I cried out for Keo, I cried out to all the gods in the sky and asked them for their rescue. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore.

I sat huddled in the old man's arms, too weak to fight. I let him hold me and keep me safe as we drifted toward the landing. I kept my eyes closed, refusing to open them. If I kept my eyes closed I would be safe.

It worked until I heard the old man say, "Sit up, boy. It's time."