

**K.S.**

*by anonymous*

“Bra, FUCK DIS!”

I watched as Kekoa, a 17-year-old cadet in the alternative rehabilitation program I was staffing, began punching the green outhouse that served as the daytime restroom facility for cadets with all of his strength. The powerful strikes of his fists against the hollow plastic structure echoed against the Ko‘olau mountain range, that outlined the east side town of Kahalu‘u, as he unleashed his fury. The rampage in front of me was in stark contrast to the beautiful lo‘i patches and well-maintained plantation style homes used for rehabilitation living quarters and onsite high school classrooms, spread across the six acre property.

“Koa, I know what this news is doing to you, but you can’t give them a reason to call the police,” I pleaded.

For all he cared, I could have been a tree, silently observing the scene unfold. So I stood, knowing it would only infuriate him further to attempt to physically restrain him. Cadets in our program at the Marimed Foundation, had much of their negative behavior tolerated. This included but was not limited to: wild outbursts, running around with self-made weapons, smoking and extreme threatening of both staff and other cadets. However, property damage was where Marimed drew the line because, unfortunately, money was something non-profits did not have in excess. I had seen other cadets reach their breaking point and choose to express their anger by kicking through a glass door or putting their fist through a window, instead of merely yelling and running wild. In each of those situations, they all had seen the back of a cop car a few hours later.

“Cadet” was the positive term we used to refer to all of the teenage boys in our program. The term was meant to inspire them and encourage them to view our alternative therapeutic residential treatment facility as a journey or a voyage, rather than a prison. I appreciated the sentiment behind the term, but I often felt that it was lost on the boys.

The Marimed Foundation began as medical relief ships traveling to Micronesia distributing medical care and supplies. To keep the organization afloat financially, they began taking high-risk youth boys and girls with them on the trips, sponsored by the government. Then an unexpected correlation began to appear. Organizations who sent the youth to Marimed found that a shocking number of them came back calmer and more focused on rehabilitating back into society. So birthed the Kailana program of Marimed. With an alternative therapeutic focus, they opened two houses and created a curriculum modeled after the voyages taken by the youth before-hand. Marimed used the journey as a metaphor for the program, and included two mandatory voyage trips to other Hawaiian islands, for each cadet to “voyage” to graduation and rehabilitation.

But the boys did not feel as though they were cadets on their own personal journeys or voyages, but rather trapped in a program that had been either court ordered or their families had sent them in hopes that we would discipline out their behavioral problems. The cadet in front of me, pummeling the outhouse, was the former. He had an extreme meth problem with multiple arrests for possession, as well as several arrests for theft.

Kekoa was tall for his age, and his lean muscular build made him an intimidating boy to many of the other cadets, as well as the staff. He was from Waianae, a place that many of our cadets took great pride in being from. It was confirmation of their status as local Hawaiian, and their credibility of being from the hood. Evidence of self-harm and prison-like tattoos marked up

his arms adding to his overall air of toughness. When he was *triggered*, a buzz word used in the therapeutic world, he was a force to be reckoned with. One day I had lowered his behavioral score down below a passing grade because he had been swearing in the onsite classroom, and pretending he hadn't. The grading system of their compliance, participation and respect was a key factor in allowing them to move forward in the program and was the only way they could gain privileges of 24–48 hour leaves back home. My low scoring of his respect level had interfered with his leave for the upcoming weekend and triggered his anger, resulting in a chair being thrown dangerously close to my head.

Despite all of these threatening traits, he was easily my favorite cadet. If one took the time to get to know him and genuinely demonstrated to him that his mental and personal well-being was a priority, he reciprocated with trust. After months of consistency, proving to him that I was not just another staff member there for a paycheck, he allowed me into his life. He shared with me his struggles, fears and goals in life. Many of the other cadets focused a lot of their energy into trying to deceive the staff, pretending to be good, doing their best to always manipulate situations in their favor. But Kekoa wasn't like that. He never tried to hide his darker side or pretend that he always had the best intentions. He was honest with those he trusted and himself, which made him one of the cadets worth going to work for. It gave me hope that even through the bad days, he could change his life.

Therapists had recently given him techniques to try and calm himself when he began to feel triggered. He had made major improvements. In fact, he hadn't had an incident in three months, until now, which was a major achievement that had been recognized publicly by all the staff, managers and other cadets.

Presently, however, he had lost control of himself. Yelling and screaming out a string of pidgin and obscenities, enraged at the news that had just been given to all our cadets, he continued to beat the outhouse. The outhouse finally flipped over as Kekoa kicked it powerfully with the strength of a mixed martial artist, giving me an opening to approach him.

“It’s not right what’s happening to you, it’s not fair at all man and I get it,” I said.

“If they make me leave Marimed, they going fo send me straight to HYCF for another year, minimum!” he said angrily. “Bra this shit ain’t my fault. They wen fucked up, why they gotta fuck our lives up?!”

Kekoa, along with the 16 other cadets, had just been given the news by the directors of the program that the whole program was being terminated. The government had pulled it’s funding for the program and gave Marimed two weeks to find new placements for all of the cadets. This also incidentally meant that I was out of a job. All staff working in the program were informed of it’s closure and their layoffs a mere 30-minutes before we told the boys. Tensions were high all around. The majority of the staff, in addition to the cadets, were also pretty upset. The “ship” of all our voyages was sinking.

The reason that the funding for the program had been pulled was due to our maintenance man’s inability to keep the living quarters to the standard required. Ironically, he was one of the only people not losing his job. Only the staff who worked directly with the cadets were being laid off, since those in management and operations could restructure and repurpose the facility for the use of the community and because the Marimed Foundation privately owned the land. There were other precipitating factors that had incurred the scrutiny of the government in the first place as well. This included one of the 21-year-old female staff members having sex with

one of our 16-year-old cadets, while other cadets watched and one had secretly filmed on a phone (that film being the only reason management found out).

The tension in the room, where we had circled them all up to tell them, had been palpable. The reactions, however, had been mixed. Cadets who knew that the only reason they were in the program was because of their family's desires, figured they were going home. That was only about four or five of the 17 cadets, but the four of them had erupted in jubilation. Some looked simply confused. Others, Kekoa included, looked terrified. Kekoa and several others, who had been in and out of HYCF (Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility), knew that completing the program at Marimed was their last chance to go home without serving lengthy sentences. According to a government report, researchers found that the re-arrest rate of juveniles in the HYCF is 82%. Many of our cadets were in our alternative program in an attempt to break this cycle.

After the initial jubilant cheers from the handful of cadets had died, those who were triggered by the news began reacting as the fear they felt began ramping up into rage. Kalei, one of the cadets with a year and a half sentence looming overhead had looked at me with silent tears sliding down his face.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do. I can't go back bra," Kalei said, with his voice catching in his throat. My chest had tightened as I felt the weight of his terror and grief. Another staff had tried to offer some support, saying how there was a chance that maybe they could find another program for him, but at that point Kekoa had sprung to his feet, fists curled and made for the door. According to the rules of the program, no cadet was ever allowed to leave our sight. No one had moved to follow him, so I had quickly risen to go after him.

So here we were. Kekoa was panting, breathing heavily trying to take calming breaths. He walked over and picked up the outhouse, standing it upright before anyone else saw that he had done something normally deserving of serious consequences. I didn't blame him at all, nor was I planning on telling a soul what had happened. After all, there was no visible damage.

"I picked da outhouse cuz I knew I couldn't break em," he said, explaining his actions.

I was strangely proud of him. Even though he had just given himself to what seemed like a blind rage, he was actually thinking about the consequences of his actions and planning ahead, which was something he definitely hadn't done in the past. He was calming down, still pacing, but no longer yelling at me.

"I'm so proud of you man. I know how stressful this is for you," I said in a calming voice. "You never know what may end up happening though. You've been doing so good in program and your PO (Parole officer) knows that. There's a good chance that you may go to another program, because the courts are not going to see the program shutting down as you failing it."

As I said it though, I knew there was no solid comfort that I could offer him. The system was failing him because even though he was promised he would get to go home if he completed our program, there was no longer a guarantee. He was very close, with probably only a month left for him to get the behavioral grades he needed to graduate. And all he could think of was all his hard work going down the drain for nothing.

My shift was coming to an end soon and I wanted him to be in a calm and positive place before I had to leave him. I hated that there was nothing that I could do that would make any solid difference in his life. Although the therapists often asked for my opinion, because they knew how close I was to the boys, when it came to real-life decisions involving their treatment,

family involvement, and placement, I had no say. It turned out that only people with college degrees were licensed to make a decisions, even if they had less experience or hardly knew the boy themselves. It reminded me of my days serving the refugees in Greece, only those with degrees and official jobs were given a voice to help change the refugees situation.

He still couldn't sit still, too agitated and anxious about the future, so we walked through the lo'i and along the 'auwai talking about his family. He had recently confided in me his concern for his little brother, that he was getting involved with the wrong crowd and he was worried that his brother might end up like him because he looked up to Kekoa.

"But he has you to look up to now and what you've overcome," I said. "He can hear from you and believe you now that the kind of lifestyle you were living before isn't worth it."

"Ya I know, but I won't be able to handle, if they put me back at HYCF," Kekoa said dismally. "Bra I cannot maintain, I know I just going go crazy if they wen put me there. I like relapse aready if they going do that. Cuz it's pointless if they won't even let me go home bra. I like go aready."

We kept walking, eventually turning back to the house where the boys lived so that I could input my grades for the cadets that I was responsible for on my shift. He was calm and all the surrounding outhouses seemed safe for the time being, but there was still no trace of hope in his face. I had called his clinical therapist, the only person who actually could give him hope and had the power to make decisions about his case, since licensed therapists had a lot of swing with the judges. They would meet as soon as the changeover of staff took place. But for now there was nothing I had the power to do to uplift his forlorn manner with hope of a brighter future.

He sat beside me as I put in the grades for each of the cadets I was responsible for. For some confidential reason that I didn't understand, we couldn't write out their full names for the

grades we submitted, only their initials. When I got down to KS, I looked at the young man sitting in front of me and scribed, "Learned how to take control of his anger, took responsibility for his actions, and initiated calming techniques of his own volition." I gave him the highest grades I could, given that staff had seen him leave a room without permission. I was proud of him, because even though he had no hope of a positive future and I had no power to give him one, he was choosing to sit calmly in front of me now. A feat unmanaged by most other cadets and certainly not managed by the KS I had met 6 months ago. Though the system was failing him, he was choosing not to fail himself.