

FOURTH CHAPTER: PAULELE¹¹

We are as nuts; we must be broken to be discovered.¹²

Paulele was twelve years old when for the first time he climbed with his elders to the crater of a long-extinct volcano and made a sacrifice to the goddess Pele.

The time before the white missionaries' arrival was rarely discussed at home; it was only on special occasions, usually when someone died, or when a child was born. The family used to gather late at night, the windows were closed, the curtains drawn, and the candlelight made the gathering mystical, mysterious. Grandma, the mother's mother, was telling us how the white chieftains had declared the defeat of the Polynesian gods and the victory of the Christian god when she had still been young. Since then, the beliefs of the ancestors were only whispered about, but the customs were still preserved in most families. If the natives ceased to exercise them and were entirely devoted to the new god, earthquakes and volcanoes were there to remind them of the old gods, who would show their anger by suddenly shaking the earth, and that quake would tear up the place where the road had once been or an eruption would send lava to destroy an entire village, only to create a whole new mountain where there used to be a fertile plain.

11 *Paulele* means faith, self-confidence, trust in the Hawaiian language; it also means to believe, to rely on someone

12 Khalil Gibran

In order to propitiate the gods, the inhabitants of the island have always offered them prayers and sacrificed pigs. Since the white people came, sacrifice was forbidden. Concealed by the darkness, especially on moonless nights, those who still believed that only the old gods could protect them, left offerings to their gods and spirits that lived in the lava.

Paulele was carrying a basket full of freshly picked fruit in his hands. The ascent was not steep or difficult, but the night was so dark that he could not even see a finger in front of his nose. His father and uncle walked in front, he and two other boys of his age walked in the middle, and his grandparents followed at the very back.

Mauna Loa¹³ was sleeping. The father said: *If you listen carefully, you will hear the volcano breathing.* The boy listened. Apart from the soft hissing that came from the sulphurous fumes, he heard nothing more. He was disappointed. Suddenly, he felt the earth shaking under him and the wind changing direction, descending all the way to the ground and creating barely noticeable eddies around his feet. Father told them to hurry and Paulele, clutching a basket of fruit in his arms, started running. The boy didn't even notice when a large papaya fruit had fallen out and rolled down the path.

My arms ache from the heavy bundle I'm carrying, but I'm scrambling without a break in a small procession along the path through pitch darkness. An unfamiliar sweet smell of some overripe fruit spreads under my nose. I would like to see it, but everything has black outlines in the dark, and there is no time to rest. Someone rushes me, my feet trip over rocks and bushes with sharp and prickly branches. In the distance,

13 The biggest volcano in the world located on the Hawaiian Big Island (*The Big Island*, or officially *Hawaii*)

I see the light of some big fire. As we get closer to that place, it gets hotter and red sparks jump high into the sky. The sky is burning. I know there's a cliff somewhere, and I'm afraid of getting too close to it, lest I slip and fall into a giant cauldron of dancing fire. I suddenly realise that my hands are empty, and I start looking around in a panic, trying to see where I dropped the bundle, but now I'm completely alone, there's no one around me, and my legs are getting stiff and heavy. I can barely move them. The sky is getting bigger, the sounds are getting louder, and the terrible black eyes of a woman with a warrior's face and wild long black hair are staring at me. She is opening her mouth and her roar swallows me.

Paulele loved these rituals. Excitement overwhelmed him as they prepared to leave. He would ask the housemates for the umpteenth time to tell what they experienced climbing up to the calm volcano, what miraculous signs they received along the way and how Pele appeared after each visit. Armed with their experiences and old legends, which kindled his imagination, the boy took every step to his destination completely aware of why he was doing it and what he expected in return. With as much fear as worship, he made sacrificial offerings, praying not only to the goddess Pele, but also to all the lesser gods. However, she was the only one who had the power to act independently of others, to appear in the form of other gods, or even in the form of human beings. The goddess of fire had the power to control not only volcanoes, but also wind, thunder, and rain. Her anger could cause a river of lava that would swallow people, animals or houses.

When Paulele was only seven years old, Pele sent her wrath from Mauna Loa to a fishing village on the other side of the island. The house was overflowing with excitement. Everyone was waiting for the grandfather, and he appeared in the late afternoon, dragging behind him an animal tied