

# Malady Mahi

by [Tony Martello](#) (June 2020)



*Surfriders*, Rex Brandt, 1959

I used to wonder why I wouldn't get seasick on my surfboard but every time I took a boat ride outside the bay, I would turn whiter than any midwestern tourist on his first day of vacation in Hawaii. I would desperately attempt to focus on the horizon with that salty sailor confidence that Ralph had but would eventually hurl over the side, feeding the South Pacific fish the wrong kind of food. Ralph didn't need badges- his nautical smile and the wrinkles on his skin spoke of many journeys out to sea. His stories, however, were out of this world. Whenever my mom would announce that she would be cooking chicken enchiladas with both Verde and red sauce, Ralph was there, and he would bring along an exciting adventure each time he came for dinner.

One time, he told us about how he was spearfishing for parrotfish on the south side of Kauai when a Tiger Shark circled above him. He had a big belt around his waist where he kept his netted catch. While diving for more fish, the shark must have sensed his catch and began to follow Ralph. He enacted how he had to unleash his belt and decoy the shark about thirty feet away from him and then swim up for a quick gulp of air and then dive back down below the reef to hide from the shark. He kept us hanging on edge by dramatically repeating his dive from the surface to the reef three times while the shark circled above him. We couldn't believe how he survived these encounters.

Another time, he blew our minds when he told us how he took his charter boat out with some guests when one tourist expected that he was catching a fish when he realized he had hooked into a piece of giant squid that had triangular Megalodon size teeth marks around it. He said the points of the teeth imprints were eight inches apart. His smile glistened large and mysterious, "There are no sharks anywhere, caught on record, with teeth that big," he told us, kids. We asked him several more questions like, "Did you ever see the giant squid? Or What was the biggest shark you ever saw?" Not only was he a real fisherman with the most exciting stories, he was a stylish surfer, too. So, as you can imagine, Ralph was my hero because he could *hang ten in the barrel* and captivate us, kids, with the best fishing stories ever!

As I grew older, I began surfing along the lava cliffs where big black, jagged chunks of the old extinct volcano were sprinkled across the reef. The comfort of my surfboard between me and the razor-sharp coral made me feel a little protected, but I always surveyed the surface and horizon for more danger. I paddled back out to the lineup where the waves would crest and roll across the reef like hollow glass cylinders. In between sets of waves, I sat still on my board and looked upon the lava cliff to the left of me, where a man, woman, and

child were gazing over the cliff down into the foamy waves crashing against the rocks. I saw the adolescent throw something into the ocean. The family watched the object for about fifteen minutes and then left, walking back to their car. I caught a few more waves and then paddled into shore. While shuffling along the inside reef to get to the sand, I saw Ralph in his charter boat taking out another group of tourists to the Napali coast for spectacular views and exciting fishing.

I walk back to my truck and drive to *Hanalei Coffee Company* to finish my term paper. I ordered some extra dark Java and some banana-papaya pancakes and then dive into the last paper of the quarter. I spend close to three hours editing my Neuroscience project on the topic of the *mind-body interface*. I need to stretch and take a break, so I walk over to *The Island Grill* and order two mahi tacos with mango salsa. I walk back to my study station at the coffee shop and eat some lunch. Halfway into my second taco, Ralph strolls in with two of his tourists. They were beaming with radiant smiles like they just discovered El Dorado.

"Koni, you won't believe this one," Ralph sets me up for another fish story. But this is unusual because he doesn't normally bring his tourists to lunch or coffee. He pulls three chairs up to my table and invites the crew to have a seat with me.

"Koni, this is Diane from Chicago and Ken from Maui...Guys, this is Koni, he's a great surfer and he's getting his Masters in Neuroscience at the University of Hawaii." I smile and shake their hands, "Aloha, guys, welcome." I close my laptop and invited them to get comfortable.

"Ken, show Koni what you caught on our expedition today." Ken opens up his bag and pulls out a small glass bottle with peeling red wax and a cork. There is a strip of white paper and a small single dose package of Advil ripped

open.

Ralph looks at Diane and then me. "Diane, show Koni your keepsake."

Ralph's charter-guests put all the items on the table. Diane gently places a tiny gold coin on the table. I recognized the dull clanging of gold hitting the old wooden table.

"You guys found this floating in the sea?" I inquired further.

Ralph jumps in . . . "Even better," then Ken interrupts,

"It was in the belly of the mahi-mahi I caught!"

Ralph chuckles,

"You guys did hit El Dorado, that is if you are from Mexico because that is what a mahi-mahi is called in Mexico and California."

Ralph continues, "I asked Ken if he wanted to ship the mahi-mahi to Maui, but he decided to have me gut it and filet it for fresh sushi. When we opened the fish up, there was a *message in the bottle* right in the mahi's belly!" Never, have I seen anything like this before." This must have rocked Ralph's world because he wasn't the sentimental type. He was mysterious but not so sentimental. I enjoy seeing the master storyteller mystified himself.

There on the open table in front of me was a small glass bottle, a very tiny gold coin, an opened package of Advil, and a strip of paper with something handwritten on it. A curious thought began to rise from my short-term memory when Ralph reiterates,

"I have seen a lot of things in the stomachs of fish

and sharks but never this. I've seen children's toys, glass fishing buoys, nets, hooks and more, but never this"

Then, I recall the family on the lava cliffs earlier today throwing something into the ocean. Could it have been this *message in a bottle* with these items? And, even more interesting, could the mahi-mahi have mistaken this to be a fish for a meal? I glance up at Ralph as his salt-crusted eyelids squint inward,

"Mahi go for surface bait. The fish may have mistaken this small glass bottle for a fish."

"Ralph, I saw a family of three earlier today throwing something the cliff at *Waikokos*.

Do you think it could have been this?"

"Possibly, and with the off-shore winds that picked up this afternoon, it could have blown out past the trolling lane where Ken caught the Mahi."

Meanwhile, Diane was stepping into the conversation and reached for the gold coin,

"Isn't this cute, I wonder if it's real? Ken, thanks for the gift, I feel like you should keep it since you caught the fish."

"No, I want you to have it after hearing about your busy life in Chicago and trying to find free time in your life, I feel like this may be a sign for you to contemplate." I asked to see the coin, "Can I see, wow, it looks like Jesus in the middle with a bunch of saints around him or apostles, and I see the date 2007." I pick up the coin and do an internet search.

My results show a 2007 Liberia-one fiftieth of an ounce-gold Thaler. It features a condensed snapshot of Christ's life with his face in the center surrounded by scenes

of his birth, the last supper, and all the apostles with their names and faces. "Guys, this is like a message of faith in a lifetime right on one-fiftieth of an ounce on a gold coin. Spectacular, and Liberia means-*The land of Freedom.*" Diane clenches the coin and puts it in her pocket. "I am so inspired by this. Thanks, Ken!"

I reach for the strip of paper that reads: *We hope this note finds you well and these items provide you with hope and relief to get you back on your given journey. When you make it to a computer with the internet, email us at [surfersandhealers@gmail.com](mailto:surfersandhealers@gmail.com)*

Ken stands up and hobbles a bit then shares, "I have been waiting to get a knee replacement for several years and was in a lot of pain this morning. Fighting that mahi took it out of me. My knee was killing me, so I took the Advil and will email this mystery person later." Ralph stands up and gathers his guests to go clean up. He prompts them, "Ok, guys, let's let Koni finish up his homework and head back to the boat to get your things." Diane and Ken both wish me luck on my paper and say, "Good-bye."

"Thank you for dropping by, nice to meet you guys. I hope the good luck continues," I encourage. On their way out, Ralph turns to me and slyly comments under his breath,

"Try putting that story in your *mind-body* paper, school-boy. And, you can title it, "Malady Mahi"

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in Clinical Psychology at Pepperdine University. Before this, he worked as a healthcare business executive, promoting medical devices to hospitals and served as an expert witness for the U.S. Dept. of Justice on the topic of patient safety devices.

He writes poetry and short stories as his hobby. He was homeschooled in Kauai and spent many years surfing Hawaii and the California coast. He earned a Biology (Pre-Med) Bachelors degree and a double minor in English & Psychology at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo in 1998. Much of his inspiration in writing stems from his struggle with two different forms of arthritis and overcoming both of them in different ways. He is a surfer, a writer, and a dedicated family man with a wife and two daughters.

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