

PROSPECT FOR MURDER
BY JEANNE BURROWS-JOHNSON

Honolulu Journalist Natalie Seachrist has moved to an apartment in the foothills of Honolulu to learn how her grandniece could have fallen to her death while renting an apartment for her last year of college. What she immediately discovers are the exotic Shànghǎi origins of the owners of the complex...and more than a little discord.

CHAPTER 9
Few people have the imagination for reality.
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1749 - 1832]

To nudge our conversation toward things closer in time and geography, I asked, “How much longer did they live in China?”

“It seems like a lifetime, but it was only a few years. For the Chinese Republic, the effects of the Great Depression went far beyond financial concerns. Despite the decline, our family still had considerable wealth. Therefore, our parents had to remain even more vigilant about our security. To avoid attracting attention from the growing hordes of thieves, our Mother put her prized jewels in cases for safekeeping and our parents seldom entertained. While retaining security personnel, Father reduced our domestic staff. Soon the outer buildings in our compound became dark and silent as we seldom ventured into them.”

At that moment, our conversation was stopped by Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*.

Miss Wong said, “I am so sorry. Let me see if this is an urgent call. Yes?” she answered.

There was silence for a moment, during which I finished one of the chocolate iced petit fours and sipped my tea. When Pearl raised her index finger to indicate she would be more than a moment, I got up and walked toward the dining area. Looking through the glass doors, I realized that the china cabinet was filled with thousands of dollars in precious antiques and furnishings.

“Very well. I will be there shortly.” Miss Wong rose and turned toward me. “I regret interrupting our visit, but my sister’s caregiver has encountered a family emergency and must leave unexpectedly. My nephew Richard is helping with the catering of an event at Kapi’olani Community College this afternoon, and there is no one but me to take Jade to physical therapy.”

“I completely understand. It’s fortunate you live close enough to be able to help her,” I commented.

“Yes, indeed. She is making great progress since having a stroke last year. She may never walk unaided again, but we are hoping that soon she will be able to personally handle her activities of daily living.”

Miss Wong then put her cell phone into its case and picked up her purse. “May I look forward to entertaining you with something stronger than tea next time? Perhaps on Thursday evening or Saturday afternoon?”

“That sounds lovely,” I replied. “I thought I had plans for Thursday, but that’s changed. It will be fine to reschedule our visit for then. But after that, I would love to entertain *you*.”

“Very well. Shall we say Thursday at five?”

“Yes. I look forward to seeing you then and hearing more of your family’s story.” I answered truthfully, moving toward the entryway to put on my sandals.

Walking back to my temporary home, I felt caught between two worlds. Still immersed in the fragrance of ginger flowers and almond cookies, I had to consciously pull my mind from the Roaring Twenties in Shànghǎi to the many questions I had about this complex, and its residents and visitors. I considered everything I had to accomplish in the next couple of days. In the morning, I had an initial meet-and-greet for the learning center where I would be volunteering. Although I had only obligated myself for a single weekly session, I planned to use my volunteerism as an excuse for wandering in and out of the apartments at any hour.

Once I was free the next afternoon, I would start preparing for cocktails with Pearl. Some of the research could be executed on-line, but other information was only available at the state archives or public library. I might not be able to redirect Pearl's waltz through the decades, but if the opportunity arose, I needed to ask intelligent questions about the property and neighborhood—if not about her family and staff.

Being a new tenant, it was logical for me to research garbage and recycling schedules. I could also call FedEx and UPS about their pickup and delivery routes and times without tipping my hand. And I could conduct Internet searches focused on the address of the complex. Since many government agencies have digitalized their records, I might be able to track the Wong family's real estate transactions including the Makiki Sunset Apartments.

At both the Hawai'i State Archives and Library I would be able to check on a variety of publications. Although only a few may have fully digitalized morgues of past issues, I could check hardcopy of archived newspapers and magazines and even the newsletters of some organizations. All that was required was time and effort.

Moving across the courtyard, I again felt that someone was watching me. The only person I had seen staring at me openly was Richard Bishop. But he did not seem dangerous, just weird. At the moment, I had no apprehension of imminent danger. Maybe my discomfort was simply the fishbowl effect of walking through a volleyball court flanked by two buildings whose open doors and windows could shield anyone who was peering out.

Most of the individuals I have encountered at the complex are like me, walking purposefully from one point to another, apparent residents or their guests. Generally, people nodded and said "Hello." But unless you met someone while getting your mail, doing laundry, or barbecuing, there was not much impetus for engaging someone in prolonged dialogue.

After dragging myself up the unyielding concrete flights of stairs, I entered B406 ready to declare the day complete. I kicked off my shoes and dropped my keys beside my purse on the coffee table. Moving on to the bedroom, I pulled off my go-to-meeting frock and slipped on a favorite shorty *mu`umu`u* from the Hilo Hattie collection. As usual the classic style and print brought a smile to my face. It reminded me of entertainer Clarissa Haili, who had changed her name to Hilo Hattie. She was often compared to Sophie Tucker, with lively audience interaction and jokes that elicited an enthusiastic response from both locals and tourists.

Re-entering the living room, I expected to find Miss Una perched on the back of the sofa or recliner. However there was no evidence of a feline presence. It was not a good sign when Miss Una fails to meet me on my return from any outing. Continuing toward the dining room and kitchen, I found the object of my quest. Miss Una was sitting on top of the table as regally as a kitten can. She completely ignored me, and continued to look intently out the slider.

"What? No greeting? No demand for a treat or a little supper?"

Finally, her tail thumped the table once and she looked over her shoulder at me.

"You know you're not supposed to be up there. You have a perfectly good kitty perch beside the door."

Silence and a hard stare were all I got in reply. After a pause, she gracefully jumped down and crossed the room to sit in front of her empty dry food bowl. Despite her reproachful look, I glanced out the small window over the sink. I realized that without the interference of the balcony, I would look directly down into the parking lot. From my current vantage point, Al Cooper's slot seemed a bit far to the right for Ariel to have landed on it from this apartment's balcony. I shivered at the image I envisioned, for the precise point from which she fell did not matter in the general scheme of her death.

After feeding Miss Una, I poured a glass of wine and went out onto the *lānai*. So far, I had avoided standing at the railing. But now I walked right up to it and peered straight down. It was clear that where Ariel had landed was definitely to the *right* of the apartment's balcony—not directly below it.

With growing apprehension, I thought about what that could mean. Glancing above the immediate scene into the hills, I watched the gathering of dark nimbus storm clouds. I hoped my living room at home would not get too wet if the wind shifted and rain inched in through the tiny gap I had left open. While I could check voicemail messages from anywhere, I realized I would need to go home periodically to check on things—or, ask Anna to monitor my home for me.

After tea with Pearl, I was not really hungry, but knew I would not last the night without eating something solid. The issue was resolved by popping some sweet and sour shrimp and a vegetable stir fry from my favorite deli into the microwave to defrost slowly. One day soon I should consider using the gourmet stainless cookware I had received as a wedding gift. Through the years, I never managed to learn how to prepare even the simplest dishes I enjoyed in the countries I visited.

I walked into the living room, reflecting on my examination of the balcony. Sitting on the sofa, I turned on my laptop and opened my file on the Makiki Sunset Apartments to note the angle of Unit B406's *lānai* in comparison to handyman Al's parking space.

In my first visit to Pearl Wong's home, I had not learned anything that seemed pertinent to Ariel's death. At any other time, I would have enjoyed the slow stroll through the early twentieth century. The absence of hard data was an acute pain in both my mind and heart, since it meant I was unable to perform any fact checking. It would be two days before I had another chance to glean anything concrete from her. If only I could determine a strategy for visiting the tenants in every apartment. That however, seemed like wishful thinking.

Hearing the microwave bell ding, I knew it was nearly time to eat. A couple of minutes later, I was considering checking in with Keoni when my phone rang.

"I was just thinking of calling you." I said looking at caller ID.

"Well, great minds and all that," Keoni responded. "How did your day go? Anything special come up when you met with the apartment manager?"

I caught him up on the minor details I had learned during my tea party and relayed my observation about the balcony's position in relation to the space where Ariel had landed.

"That's interesting, because a lot of suicides are almost ritualistic about executing—forgive the verb—their deaths. They leave notes explaining how their lives have become unbearable. Sometimes, they thoroughly clean their homes and even the site where they're going to do the deed. Depending on their chosen method of self-destruction, they may decide to kill themselves in the nude. In such cases, they can be obsessive in folding their clothes and neatly aligning their shoes and accessories, as though they're about to put them back on.

"If Ariel had jumped off the apartment's balcony of her own volition, it probably would have been from somewhere in the middle, not skewed to one side," he continued. "By the way, I

don't have any details for you, but Nathan and you will probably be getting a call from the ME's Office sometime soon. I ran into my friend Marty tonight. The one I told you is an assistant coroner. I was having a final meeting with a client at the Beach Bar at the Moana Hotel, when he walked in for a drink with his wife."

I gulped. "Did he reveal anything about Ariel's death?"

"We weren't speaking privately and he can't divulge anything that isn't public knowledge. He just announced that the initial autopsy report had been written up, although the comprehensive toxology report usually takes a few weeks. With you, as well as her grandfather, being listed as her next of kin, I know *you'll* be included in the reporting process."

Keoni paused for a moment. "Listen Natalie, I want you to know I'm not withholding any information from you. But I don't want you to get your hopes up about receiving immediate answers to your questions and concerns. With all the testing that comes into play in deaths that aren't attended by a physician, it's probably going to be a couple more weeks before the comprehensive report is finished."

"Mmhm," was all the reply I could muster.

"That's why you've got to be patient and continue to be vigilant about your safety. You should know that if a clear determination of suicide had been made, you'd have received a call saying, 'we regret to inform you that Ariel may have been responsible for her own death.' And if they had found indications of foul play, detectives would have shown up at the apartment for a full-blown investigation. And if it ever comes to *that*, they're going to want to know why *you* are on the premises!"

"I know that, Keoni. And I've been thinking about what I'd say, if it reaches that point. You know I'm going back to Miss Wong's for cocktails. After that I may know a few more specifics about this place and its cast of characters."

"Okay. But keep in touch with me every day. And if you find the smallest reason to be suspicious of anyone, or are nervous about anything, call me immediately. I'm never that far away and I'll have you and Miss Una out of there in a flash."

That was what concerned me. I knew Keoni would do his utmost to safeguard me, but I wanted the freedom to be able to explore the answers to my questions for myself, as well as for Nathan. Nevertheless, I assured Keoni of my continuing adherence to his rules, and we signed off for the night. Next, I checked the voicemail for my land line at the condo and was happy there was nothing that required a response until the next morning.

I set the microwave for one last round of cooking. Two minutes later, I was sitting down with my plate on my lap to watch the evening news while I ate. There was no further information on Ariel's case. Despite the lack of news, I decided to call Nathan. If nothing else, we could compare notes on our preparations for Ariel's memorial service. My primary responsibility was selecting photos to be enlarged, framed and captioned for a display of the key moments in her life. So far, all I had done was bookmark the ones I intended to use.

By discussing this aspect of the memorial, I could push aside the issue of my true location and focus. In order to limit the direction of our discussion, it was best for me to control when and how we spoke. Otherwise, voices or background noise might give away the fact that I was not in my condo.

"Hi, Natalie. You timed your call perfectly. I was video conferencing with Bri."

"How is she doing Nathan?" I responded.

"She's regretting taking summer classes and is so upset that she can barely keep her mind on her end-of-term assignments. She's decided to cancel an additional class she was going to

take this summer.”

“I think it’s good she’s had school to occupy her mind—especially since we’re not sure when the memorial will be. I...I have a feeling we’ll be getting a preliminary call from the ME’s office soon.”

I did not want to mention that Keoni had tipped me off about the forthcoming call regarding the autopsy. Any further conversation about the topic might have aroused his curiosity about why I was in close touch with Keoni, since he is a retired homicide detective.

Like most of our nightly chats, the pauses between our sentences were pregnant, with undeclared and to-be-continued issues. I got through the call with my emotions intact, but I had barely refrained from revealing what I was doing in Makiki. That is the beauty of a telephone; unless you are speaking with the authorities or a computer geek, no one knows your location.

After turning down the bed, I went into the bathroom for my nightly “beauty” routine. When I came out, Miss Una was waiting for our usual reading session, during which I slipped off to dreamland. After a short while, I awoke short of breath and feeling weighted in my extremities. I glanced around. No cat. That was not unusual since she had taken to nocturnal guard duty at the slider. I sank back on the pillows and tried to recapture the flow of sleep. But it was not to be. Gradually, my breathing slowed and I felt my body becoming lighter.

* * * * *

My vision has returned. The scene is brighter than before. I am exiting a bus on Wilder Avenue. I look left and right, then down at a note scribbled on a white, lined, three-by-five inch card. I look closely. The writing is not mine.

I stare at the hands in front of me. No rings. There is a Hopi silver bracelet on my right wrist. The face of a stainless steel Seiko diving watch on my left is turned to the inside of my wrist to keep it from being smashed. How do I know this? Ariel always wore her watch this way so she did not have to remove it if she had an opportunity for unexpected tennis sets, .

Okay. This is a new phenomenon. In this vision, I am not me. I am Ariel. It has been hard enough having visions throughout my life, but now I am personally experiencing the action as one of the people involved in it. The scene around me fades from full color in real time to dull-toned images that reveal themselves in cadenced slow-motion. I am literally of two minds, observing myself thinking and behaving as Ariel.

I float along the sidewalks, looking around as the newcomer to the neighborhood that Ariel will be. I consider the bus routes I’ll take to school, for grocery shopping, and to meet friends or Aunt Natalie in Waikīkī. Suddenly, my slow-motion progress up the winding street snaps.

Now in real time and full color, I look at the front of the Makiki Sunset Apartments as though for the first time. A sign below the name of the complex announces “Vacancy” in large letters. I walk into the nearest entry to the parking lot. It’s nearly empty. There are two buildings separated by a large patch of scraggly grass. Mid-way, an old volleyball net announces there may be fun-loving residents waiting for a new player. Toward the back, a fierce dragon breathes out a stream of water from the top of a tall, three-tiered, rectangular black granite water fountain.

A fancy door stands out from others on the building to the left. A brass-edged sign with black lettering announces this is the manager’s office. Hanging off the bottom is a smaller sign in stenciled aluminum that says Open. I approach the door and knock.

A small Asian woman in a long orange and blue mu`umu`u comes out onto the tiny cement slab in front of the apartment. She welcomes me for a scheduled preview of an

apartment. Introductions are simple: she's Miss Wong; I'm Ariel Harriman. Reaching back through the doorway, the woman pulls a ring of keys and clipboard from a table just inside the entrance. We walk across the courtyard, chatting about my upcoming year at UH and the many perks I'll enjoy as a tenant in this excellent property.

We arrive at a steep set of stairs at the center of the second building. Miss Wong grabs the railing and begins climbing. She glances over her shoulder occasionally to ensure I'm with her. By the time we reach the top floor, I've learned about the many amenities that come with the apartment: In addition to the volleyball court, there's a patio along the back of the two buildings with hibachis for grilling. Each building has a laundry facility on the ground floor; and, on the top floors there are soda and ice machines.

Miss Wong escorts me to unit B406. We face a door flanked by a narrow strip of louver windows. She inserts a worn brass key in the lock. Although the apartment is about to be painted and cleaned, we take off our shoes before entering. We're standing in a large living room. Along the left wall are three doors. The first is to the master suite, with a bedroom and attached bathroom. Next is a slightly smaller bedroom, followed by a guest bathroom.

Ahead are narrow pillars framing an arched entry to the kitchen and dining area. On each side are cabinets with leaded-glass doors and open shelving above. I can already picture displaying my collectibles. To the right is a space for a dining table, in front of a slider leading to the lānai. To the left is a small kitchen with lots of storage and counters with way cool old black and white tiles.

I look down at my watch and wonder when my friend TJ will arrive. We're both signing the lease, but as the primary tenant, I get to enjoy the master suite. I try not to laugh. The bedroom's closet is the size of Grandpa Nathan's broom closet. Although the bathroom has a vintage pedestal sink and convenient tub-shower combination, it needs a thorough scrubbing. It's too bad that Auntie Carrie is no longer capable of conversation. I'll have to ask Aunt Natalie about removing rust stains.

Classic music interrupts Miss Wong's launch into the benefits of the investment she's made to provide her tenants with WI-FI and cable connections. She looks at me with a blank stare while she listens to the voice coming through her cell phone. She hangs up and says she has to take care of a family matter.

Yes, I like the unit. Yes, I can finish exploring the complex by myself. Of course, I'll close and lock the door on my way out. Yes, I'll meet her at her apartment when I am through looking over the property. And I'll call my friend TJ to find out when she'll arrive.

Miss Wong departs. I walk through the living, dining and kitchen areas, picturing how I'll arrange the few pieces of furniture that we'll need. I'm only going to be here for a year and since I'll be travelling through Europe after completing a class this summer, I don't need to bother with much more than a bed before the fall. As TJ's only a sophomore, she may decide to get another roommate when I leave after graduation next year.

The refrigerator and cupboard doors are open. The shelf-lining paper looks clean enough, but smells like a combination Korean barbecue restaurant and pizzeria—sure signs there's a healthy—or maybe not-so-healthy—student population on site. The sliding door to the lānai is cracked open. I walk out onto the balcony and look down at the parking lot. Although neither TJ nor I have cars, the space will come in handy when our friends come for a volleyball game or barbecue.

I pull out my smart phone. I text TJ. Twice. No reply.

I walk back through the small apartment and put on my shoes at the front door. I look

over the walkway railing and down into the volley ball court. Yeah, that could be a cool way to end a day. No sign of Miss Wong. She must have returned to her apartment.

I call TJ. No response. She calls me back, out of breath. She's sorry she got held up. Her English prof called her in after her exam. Sooo sorry. She'll try to call again before she and her boyfriend Sean board their flight to Hilo. I can fill her in on the apartment later. If I like it, I should sign the lease and offer a deposit. We joke about the lingerie shopping we did in hopes that Sean's ready to pop the big question during their weekend getaway.

Well, I guess I'm on my own. It's awfully hot and I'm thirsty. I might as well get a soda from the refreshment alcove that's next door. That's what it's here for—aside from generating some extra income for Miss Wong. I turn and walk the few steps to the open archway. There's a slight movement to my side and I see the back of a man in a work shirt crouched down beside the soda machine that's pulled out slightly from the wall. He's staring intently at a metal box in front of him. I hope he'll be through fixing the machine in a minute.

Despite the open space, it smells like a sweaty men's locker room. I walk toward the back wall's arched cutout and look down at the parking lot. Turning around, I see the repair man is still working. I guess I won't be able to get a drink. I walk toward the doorway. Suddenly, my vision is blocked. My breath catches and I hear the abrupt cry of a mynah bird.

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