

Waking Up in Eden

Lucinda Fleeson

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“True adventures come without safety nets,” writes award-winning journalist Lucinda Fleeson as she trades her staid East coast life for a Hawaiian adventure. Fleeson moves to Kauai to serve as fundraiser for the National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG), a 100-acre parcel so rich in botanical treasures it would make any gardeners heart dance. Here are rare tropical plants, cliffs of molten lava, and spectacular beaches which Fleeson explores on foot, on horseback, and by racing canoe. Surely this is paradise!

But paradise has its poisons, too, as Fleeson soon learns. Upon her arrival, the NTBG staff does not shower Lucinda with Hawaiian leis; instead, they give her a vermin-infested shack and a broken-down car. She writes: “I rushed pell-mell into this momentous change and I am stuck with it, alone in the jungle, marooned in a filthy and dilapidated house. I am overwhelmed with loneliness and the feeling of having made bad choices in life.”

She confronts board members and donors who treat her with disdain and academics whose egos are so inflated they would rather see endangered species perish than capitulate to a rival. She is threatened by island families still engaging in ancient feuds. Nonetheless, under the visionary leadership of director William Klein, NTBG begins to flourish.

As the garden recovers, the author heals from old wounds and discovers fresh passions. Her newfound zest for life proves that “gardens are for growing people,” too.

Fleeson describes her adventures with a journalists even hand, but she does not shy away from controversy. When writing about the tumultuous development of the garden, she tells tales and names names. Thus, *Waking Up in Eden* is more than simply memoir or adventure tale. Fleesons account is both a refresher course in history, sociology, and anthropology, and a wake-up call to those who care about conserving the earths endangered flora and fauna. Included are commentaries on topics as diverse as Hawaii itself: Darwins theory of evolution; the bombing of Pearl Harbor; the formation of archipelagos; fossils remains from the Kawai sinkhole; Hawaiian culinary history; the influential, gay Allertons of Chicago; and wild, celebrity-filled parties held at the Allerton Gardens on Kawai.

Waking Up in Eden is a book for the Renaissance person who enjoys savoring an experience, even vicariously, and the gardener who revels in cultivating beauty.

NANCY E WALKER (July / August 2009)

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