



KALAUPAPA, Hawaii — The peace of morning comes to the small village of famous isolation called Kalaupapa. Breezes rustle the berry bushes.

Myna birds call from treetops to wild pigs below. Life stirs on this spit of land between the soaring Molokai cliffs and the stretching Pacific abyss.

The residents who call themselves patients move about in the hours before the few tourists of the day arrive. Here is Danny, who first came here in 1942, lingering a moment in the peekaboo sun; Ivy, who arrived in 1956, standing outside the gas station she runs; Boogie, here since 1959, driving a clattering old van.

Boogie, whose given name is Clarence Kahilihiwa, gently explains why he considers himself a patient, not a resident. Some people, the state health employees and National Park Service workers, live here as part of their jobs. Others live here because this is where they were sent, against their will, long ago.

You see, he says, "We are - and you are not."

Those who are have Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy. Those who are represent the last few of 8,000 people who, over a the span of a century, were banished to Kalaupapa because of an illness once called the "separating sickness." Many never again felt the embrace of loved ones living somewhere beyond the volcanic formations that rise like stone sentries just offshore.

Hawaii effectively liberated Kalaupapa by abolishing its isolation laws in 1969 - more than 20 years after the development of medicine to control and cure the disease. Earlier this year, the state's Legislature formally apologized to the patients and their families for "any restrictions that caused them undue pain as the result of government policies surrounding leprosy."

Today, just 24 patients are left: 24 people who experienced the counterintuitive twinning of loneliness and community, of all that dying and all that living. Here, you may have grieved over the forced surrender of your newborn; you may also have rejoiced in finding a life partner who understood.

Ten live off island, including eight in a hospital in Honolulu, 53 miles, or 85 kilometers, away. The rest live in Kalaupapa, now a national historical park with restrictions befitting its almost sacred nature. When asked why he stays, Boogie provides an answer so easy it is complicated: "This is my home."

At 67, he is among the youngest patients, silver-haired and weather-beaten, quick to shake hands. When he was a young boy, a rosy spot appeared on his cheek, and his parents had no choice but to take him to a special hospital outside Honolulu. "When my parents left me," he says, "that is when I crossed the line."

Boogie moved nearly 50 years ago to Kalaupapa, where three siblings are now buried, including a sister who died at the age of 12. Although he has been off-island many times, visiting the mainland, shopping in Honolulu, his identity is here, where he has married twice and done everything from operate the theater's projector to preside over the Lions Club.

He is also on the board of Ka'Ohana O Kalaupapa, an organization that advocates for patients and the preservation of the settlement, which was established in 1866 amid growing panic about the spread of leprosy. We must remember the story of this place, he says, a story that began with the sorrowful arrival of nine men and three women.

His dust-covered van pulls up to the gas station, where his wife, Ivy, 72, aims a hose's lazy spray on the windshield. As a Kalaupapa patient, she has known both liberation's joy, with trips to the mainland and Europe, and confinement's anguish: Her two children from a previous marriage were taken away immediately after birth because that was the law.

Husband and wife of more than 30 years gaze at each other through the distortion of running water on glass. Then he continues on, past the post office, past the wharf where, once every summer, a barge pulls up with building supplies, furniture and the occasional new car.

"Christmas in July," they call it.

He turns onto a gravel stretch called Damien Road, past the overgrown spot where the famous patient Olivia Breitha - "Even if my skin is insensitive," she once wrote, "my heart and soul are not" - ran a chicken farm with her husband, John; past a tree-shrouded cemetery, where the rub of time has made tombstone almost indistinguishable from rock.

Farther on, Boogie points into a blur of dense green. "The picture of Damien, where he was kneeling down," he says, recalling a famous image. "It was here."

He reveres Father Damien, the strapping, strong-minded Roman Catholic missionary who came in 1873 to give hope and dignity to a place often called a "living tomb." With the help of patients, the priest improved St. Philomena Church, built houses, planted trees, created a water system, established a choir, nursed the living and gave proper burial to the dead.

After he contracted leprosy, Father Damien wrote that he was now "the happiest missionary in the world." He died in 1889 at the age of 49, and was buried a few yards from an open field that is believed to contain as many as 2,000 unmarked graves.

Father Damien's canonization is expected to take place late next year, and Boogie and Ivy plan to be there in Rome. For now, Boogie honors the man often called, simply, Damien, by pausing awhile at the priest's grave, hands clasped, head bowed.

The noon sun rises above Kalaupapa's lush solitude. Tourists, maybe two dozen in all, have traveled by mule down the cliff from "topside" Molokai, and are now lunching quietly in a grassy field.

Boogie remembers the Boy Scout camp that was near here; gone now. He greets a couple of the tourists and moves on.

Toward the end of the day, a stop is made at the care facility where there reside some patients who remember when visitors were required to don gowns and have police escorts. When patients lived in a swirl of don't touch this, don't go there. When there were dances, and musical shows, and lei-making contests, and extremely competitive softball games with bats especially adapted for hands that could no longer grip.

In one room, Makia Malo, a gifted storyteller of 74, sits in a wheelchair, sunglasses covering his compromised eyes. He so vividly recalls the morning he was sent as a boy to Kalaupapa that you share the child's excitement about boarding an airplane for the first time, even though you know the dreaded reason for the trip. In another room, Henry Nalaieleua, 84, who wrote a memoir of his rich life in Kalaupapa, talks about the black-and-white photograph in his book, of a boy of 10, posed with hands across his chest to help document the state of his just-diagnosed disease. The boy glowers back at you from the harrowing past.

"I was scared and defiant," that boy as man says. "Or maybe I just didn't care to smile."

Who will tell the story of Kalaupapa after Henry has gone, and Makia and Ivy and Danny and Boogie? Boogie says he thinks about this all the time: "Every time one person dies, we get less and less."

Still, he believes he has had a good life, with a loving wife and a remote paradise to call home. He prays daily to Father Damien. And when sea breezes stir the whispers in the trees, he listens.