

# NAUPAKA

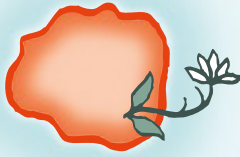


A BOOK OF LOSS, LEAVING  
AND RETURNING

Lidewij Bosman

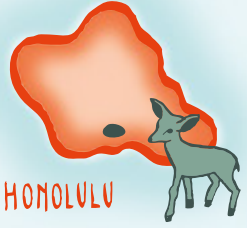
Liinkt

NI'HAU



KAUAI

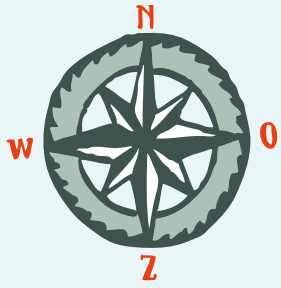
O'AHU



HONOLULU

*pacific ocean*

 HAWAII 



MOLOKAI

MAUI

LANAI

KAHOOLAWE

THE BIG ISLAND

HILO





*NAUPAKA, the taboo-breaking autobiographical debut of journalist Lidewij Bosman was quite controversial.*

*The daily Dutch quality paper De Volkskrant called it "one of the most controversial books in recent years".*

*Belgian news magazine Knack writes: "Naupaka is a book that will leave no-one unmoved."*

*Glossy women's magazine Grazia awarded it with 5 stars: "An absolute must-read".*

*Lideweij is thousands of miles away from her true love, while he is fighting for his life. They'd been inseparable for years, fighting Hodgkin's Lymphoma side by side, until Lideweij makes the excruciating decision not to be at his side when he passes away. She leaves for Hawaii, the place where only ten months earlier Sander had proposed to her and told her about the legend of the naupaka flower.*

*Her journey helps her to work through the deep sorrow. Tears are gradually replaced by inspiring insights and new dreams.*



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A book about loss, leaving, and returning





Lidewej Bosman

NAUPAKA  
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Liinkt

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FOR YOU, SANDER.

28 JUNE 2013



**@Shendersson**, 19:42

"Fighting, almost dead... But not just yet!!!"

# Introduction



7306 miles away from me the love of my life is on his deathbed. He, my best friends and even my own mother have begged me to come back. But a deep inner feeling inside me is stronger, and it tells me that I have to stay here. On Hawaii. Close to the woman whose face I see in my dreams. In the same place where he and I walked, barely a year ago...

*There he is, at the foot of the bed. Sander, my one and only, standing there, with his buzz cut and stubble. “Li! Shall we go see the sunrise? Or would you rather sleep a little longer?” No need to think twice about that. I swing my legs off the mattress and slip into my favorite pair of silver-gray Havaiana’s. Although I prefer to call them “Hawaiana’s”, as we are in Kaua’i, one of the Hawaiian islands.*

*“Then we’d better hurry!” Sander is already standing in the doorway of our lodge. He grabs my hand, gives it a brief squeeze and leads me outside. In the garden the white and yellow frangipani flowers are already spreading their delicious, fresh sweet smell. We follow a path, with dense ferns and hibiscus flowers as big as your hand, and end up in a small bay with crystal clear water and a pearly white sandy beach, with one lone crooked palm tree. Little white crabs scurry away from our feet, looking for pools of sea water. I spot a tree trunk with three words carved into the wood: “Angel enlighten one”.*

*“Why don’t we cuddle up right here?” I ask, pulling Sander towards me. Silently we stare at the golden orange play*

*of light on the horizon. After a while Sander turns around and picks a tiny white flower. He carefully places it in the palm of my hand; it's no bigger than the top of my thumb.*

*"Wow, that's funny, it's a half-flower! It only has petals on the bottom."*

*Sander nods. "There's an extraordinary legend about this flower. The story took place on the biggest island of Hawaii, on Big Island. A long, long time ago a young couple that was very much in love lived there. But the Fire Goddess of the island, Pele, decided to throw a spanner in the works. She tried to seduce the man, but didn't manage, because his heart belonged to someone else. The goddess was furious. If she could not have him, no one could. She chased him into the mountains and pelted him with lava stones. The Fire Goddess' sisters could not bear the sight and decided to transform him into a half-flower. They named the flower "naupaka", which was the name of the mountain where he'd been sent. Pele's sisters then did the same with his true love."*

*Sander picks another flower, pressing their hearts close together. "According to the legend they will one day grow back towards each other and become one flower again." He sighs heavily. "My lovely, lovely Li, the legend of Naupaka is our story, because we are also being torn apart by evil and we will not grow old together either. But I'm sure that we will one day also become one flower again, in whatever form that may be." He gets down on one knee in the sand, takes my hand and asks me, his eyes full of tears: "Will you marry me?" A ray of sun lights up his blue-gray eyes that look up at me expectantly. I lean towards him and kiss him on the lips. "Yes, my love. Yes!"*

PART ONE  
FIGHTING  
THE NETHERLANDS, 2012  
OUR LAST YEAR TOGETHER





# 1 A survival rate of 8%

That's it then. Here I am, with a bowl of scrambled eggs with chia seeds and a cup of strong tea in front of me, sitting in our ground-floor flat of 700 square feet in the northern borough of Utrecht.

"It's going to be a rainy week," says the weather man on the morning news. The spring is showing its dark side. Just like me, because I've been home from work since a few weeks. "A burnout," said my GP. I prefer to call it "stressed-out", which sounds a lot less official and not quite as serious.

I fill my days with boring household chores like vacuuming and mopping. The living room, kitchen and bathroom have never been so spick-and-span. And although my own spring feeling is still buried somewhere deep inside, our small city garden is a dazzling display of daffodils and crocuses and hyacinths. The first day of spring, a few weeks ago, was pure torture. Everyone was out enjoying the sun, while we were stuck inside; Sander had just had another grueling round of chemotherapy.

I was actually annoyed with the people barbecuing in the park, annoyed with the overflowing side walk terraces. I wasn't allowed to join in but I could see it right there, the life my heart so yearned for. Why did this have to happen to us? I too wanted the white picket fence-life. While all our friends are getting pregnant, having great careers and are able to buy their dream house, we've been battling cancer for four years straight now.

I'm hardly sick, not like Sander is, but I'm so battle-weary.

My remedy? Meditation, mindfulness exercises, pure chocolate, relaxing in the sauna, jogging in green surroundings, retail therapy and lunch dates with girlfriends.

Not working, but doing fun stuff; it feels kind of ambivalent. And yet I have to let go of these emotions, just like I will have to try to forget my fears for the future; otherwise I will end up going over the cliff's edge all the same.

A few weeks ago Sander's very last medical trump card – Lenalidomine, officially intended as a treatment for bone cancer, but in some cases it also seemed to work against Hodgkin's Lymphoma - was overtrumped. He now has a measly eight percent survival rate. I feel a knot in my stomach when I remember what the internist told us: a survival rate of less than ten percent. It's hopeless; things are not going to work out.

And ever since, I've done nothing but worry. It feels like I'm drowning in my own whirlpool of thoughts and doubts. Will I ever be able to laugh again? And I mean really laugh. Will I ever be able sit on a side walk terrace again without a worry in the world? Will I ever dare to contemplate the future again? And what will a future without Sander look like? In order to not drive myself completely crazy, I repeat the following mantra over and over: "*Sander is not going to die. Sander is not going to die.*" But I don't sound all that convinced. Where is the battle-spirit I used to have four years ago?

*The metro has just passed the Duivendrecht train station when my phone rings. "It's not good, Li." Sander sounds very calm. "They want me to go to hospital and get some scans right away." There's a ringing sound in my ears. This past year he'd been suffering from all kinds of weird symptoms: inexplicable itching, terrible sweats at night, and he was extremely tired. He would suddenly fall asleep: in the car, on the couch, during a dinner with my family. My brother*

*was worried and had at one point asked me if Sander was perhaps doing drugs. Because his eyes and cheeks were so hollow, his body was gaunt, and his skin was ashen. The GP had not known what to make of it and came to the conclusion that the high inflammatory markers in his blood were the cause of the many scratch wounds on his skin. Just to be sure she referred him to an orthomolecular doctor, whose guess was as good as hers, and who advised him to “leave out the sugar for now”. Sander dutifully obeyed. The result? He lost even more weight. Or at least, that’s what we thought. When all of a sudden a big bump appeared in his neck, it turned out that all his symptoms were traceable to Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, or “Hodgkin’s”, as most Dutch people call it in the vernacular. The assassin had quietly been able to work himself up to an advanced grade four.*

*However, we were relieved when the internist told us that the treatment resulted in a survival rate of no less than ninety percent. Hodgkin’s is the oldest and considered to be one of the most curable forms of cancer. Sander’s first chemo worked like a charm. He suffered little side-effects and felt great. His life force returned and within a few months back was the guy I’d fallen head over heels in love with. The following months were a dream. We partied, went to loads of dance festivals, splurged all our money on vacations and laughed like nothing had ever happened. “We’re not going to give up,” was Sander’s new life motto. And: “I’ve got Hodgkin’s, but Hodgkin’s doesn’t have us.”*

*But then, on Christmas Eve of all nights, a scan revealed several new tumors, and they were growing. That really was a wake-up call. This was not just any disease, this was cancer. And you can die from cancer.*

I force myself to stop worrying, take out my iPhone and scroll through my list of contacts, in search of someone to have lunch with. But who? Everyone is either at work or busy with the kids. Maybe Juuls, who works as a freelance journalist. I bet she'll have time. She picks up after the second ring. "Hey, Li!" her high-spirited voice greets me. "You want to meet up in town? I'd love to. See you there in an hour, okay?" *My lifesaver. Hooray for self-employment!*

Two hours later, with a much lighter heart, two bags full of new comfort clothes and a wet umbrella, I take bus 38 to Utrecht-North. Just when I want to check in with my travel card, the bus suddenly accelerates and I end up tripping over someone's foot. A guy grabs me by the arm and makes sure I don't fall. "Thanks", I mumble. Two friendly eyes peer at me from under a green/white baseball cap.

"I guess the bus driver is sidelining as a matchmaker," he winks at me. I flush, smile sheepishly and walk to a seat all the way in the back of the bus. Am I allowed to flirt, despite my steady relationship of no less than twelve years? I'm instantly overcome with shame. My boyfriend is extremely ill and here I am wondering if flirting is allowed! Sander is my buddy and I'm still very much in love with him. But I also know I could lose him any moment. Four years of taking care of him have left me worn-out and my fears of what the future will bring are getting worse and worse. In a while Sander might not be here anymore. What then? Will I ever meet a new true love? But won't I then be too old to have children?

It's almost dark when I get off the bus. In the highest tree in our street a blackbird sings its evening song. I pause to listen when I hear a car approach. The bird is overruled by the *thump, thump* of a loud house beat. *Wait, I know that song*, and as soon as I turn around, I see it's Sander behind the steering wheel, with a big grin on his face while his right hand is tapping along

with the beat. He rolls down the window and whistles at me. “Hey there, gorgeous!” he shouts, loud enough so the whole street can hear him. A man sitting on the terrace in front of the restaurant on the corner turns to us with a smile. He lifts up his beer. “Cheers mate, I’ll drink to that!”

I get in the car and plant a kiss on his lips while I take in the spicy smell of Chanel on his warm skin. “Hi there, sweetie! How was work?”

“Great!” He sounds positively radiant. “Actually, it was really great! I can’t really figure it out, but without those pepper-uppers like Prednison and Dexamethasone I actually feel pretty good. But I guess we’d better wait and see how the rest of the week goes.” He tucks a lock of blond hair behind my ear. Sander is feeling good and wants to continue taking part in normal life as long as possible. His work at the television production company is a good distraction.

“Hey, why don’t we grab a pizza in town? And uh... we could just go by car, because you’re not allowed to drink anyway,” I add with a mischievous wink. Because if there’s anyone who likes a stiff drink, it’s Sander. Before he started with this new medication, he would drink two bottles of wine a day, and good wine too, in order to avoid a hangover. But alcohol is a definite no-no during this treatment.

*“You’ve got to believe me,” he’d announced solemnly when I’d asked him if he would ever stop drinking. “I promise that once I start on this medication, everything will change,” he’d said, waving his glass of Pouilly-Fussé at me. “From that moment onwards, I can and will face the battle.”*

A moment later he suddenly turns down the volume of the car radio. “Actually, I am a bit tired. Shall we just order in some sushi and watch *Breaking Bad*?” The series is about a chemistry teacher with lung cancer who starts to manufacture and sell drugs to ensure his family will have enough money

once he's gone. "Who knows, I might even learn a thing or two so that you can go on a shopping spree in the P.C. Hoofstraat," he adds with a twinkle in his eyes.

When I get out of the car, the neighbor's cat saunters over. She's brown-black with a white spot on her nose and she greets me with a soft head butt and a lot of loud meowing.

"Hey there, Miss Alley Cat," Sander cries out. "And how are you doing today?" She quickly goes up to him and snakes around his legs. As soon as we open the door to our apartment the smell of peonies hits me. Because of the heat of the gas fire, the huge flowers have burst open and turned into veritable perfume bombs. I walk up to the table and take a flower out of the large glass vase.

"Sweetie, come and smell this!" Sander leans in towards the anthers and takes a big whiff. "Amazing!" he cries out, embracing me. "You know that I really love that about you, that you can enjoy little things like this. I'm so glad that you passed that on to me."

I freeze in his arms. He just used the past tense. *Is he saying goodbye?* I feel a panic attack coming on.

"What's wrong?" Sander sounds upset.

Shall I tell him what I was thinking? I know how important it is to share things, however confronting it may be.

Sander pulls me towards him and continues in an upbeat tone of voice: "I really want to learn many more plant and tree names from you, because I still know so few of them. Like cow-slip, those are the big yellow flowers by the water, and not the little ones in our garden, right?" He's pointing at the pilewort that's growing rank. He kisses me; I feel his lower lip trembling slightly, a sure sign that he's not as upbeat as he sounds.

"You know what I was thinking, didn't you?" I ask, tentatively.

Sander nods. "Of course. You and me, we've got a very

strong connection, girl.”

We order sushi for four at the best Japanese restaurant in town and settle down in the comfy cushions on the couch. Sander puts his feet on my lap and turns to me with his pitiful doggy eye look. “Would you please give me a foot massage?” I take off his black sport socks and touch the dark blue veins on top of his feet. They not only contained many liters of chemotherapy, but also the experimental drug sgn-35. This new form of therapy would go straight to the disease instead of also destroying all the healthy body cells, or at least that’s what the patient information leaflet said. After only a few administrations, Sander did indeed make a miraculous recovery and seemed disease-free. Except that the medication also caused permanent damage to his nervous system, with numb feet and finger tips as a result. They cut the treatment short to prevent further paralysis.

Sander soon falls into a deep sleep and his face becomes shroud-like white. I know that I don’t need to worry but it still looks scary. As if his illness is momentarily revealing itself to me. Sander, my handsome guy with his buzz cut and stubble. He used to spend hours in front of the mirror, fixing his hair, until he had to shave it off right before chemo. However, his new haircut looked great and ever since the clipper is doing overtime.

That night we both sleep restlessly and bump into each other twice in the bathroom. Around five o’clock in the morning I’m wide awake. I stare out the bedroom window, where I slowly see the contours of our garden shed becoming more distinct. The neighbor’s cat that suddenly jumps over the fence onto our driftwood garden table startles me. My heart is doing overtime. I stay in bed and try to calm down by quietly meditating. Usually I manage to reach a state of deep relaxation

within minutes, but this time the thoughts take over. *How long will this next treatment take? Maybe Sander will stay sick for God knows how many years and we will never have children. What if I lose my job because I'm no longer able to function properly? Then we will have no more money for fancy dinners and city breaks, the only things that still add a bit of fun to our life.* The panic is getting worse and worse. We will never get through this. Oh my God, we will never get through this!!

“God, if you exist, please help me,” I cry out softly towards the ceiling. “If life really has nothing more to offer, then let me just die as well.” Nothing happens. Total silence, except for Sander’s breathing. But now I’m feeling anger. “Dammit, just give me a sign that you exist!” And then, on the left side of the bed, a green haze appears. Scared I pull the duvet over my eyes. I carefully fold it back a little and see how the light becomes brighter and brighter and then starts to emit a series of small electrical currents towards the side of the bed. Funny enough I’m no longer scared; on the contrary, a wave of love sweeps over me. It’s so hot that I break out into a sweat. Awestruck, I whisper: “I’m not sure who or what you are, but please, help me. It’s so incredibly difficult to live with this fear. I don’t want to lose Sander.”

The green apparition takes on a long rectangular shape and stands there, motionless, next to the bed, without a human expression or any form of communication. When I try to focus on the light, my eyelids suddenly feel very heavy and I fall into a deep sleep.

Beams of sunlight peek through a crack in the bedroom curtains. A loud bell clangs through the neighborhood, children’s voices echo over the playground outside the school next to our garden. Eight o’clock, time to get up. The mattress next to me is empty. Sander is already in the shower and is loudly singing a



song he made up himself, using my nickname, “Liedje”, which means “little song” in Dutch. It always makes me smile when he sings this. “Liedje, a happy little melody, a girl who always smiles.” It’s incredibly cute and adorable, but he’s singing it so awfully loud that everyone in our street can hear it, whether they want to or not.

“Good morning, sweetie pie!” I squeeze in next to him under the pathetic weak flow of water and pull him close to me. We stay like that for a while, tightly wrapped in each other’s arms.

“Today is the beginning of a new phase. Full of love, happiness and miracles,” I say quietly. I decide to keep the wondrous nightly apparition to myself for now.

