

Pele's Daughter

Melissa Llanes Brownlee

The ocean. I can hear it, even here in the church. I want to be out there, but Auntie Haole is dead. I try to peek at her through the pukas between the heads of the aunties and uncles I haven't met. She is lying in a white coffin, her ehu hair spread over a white satin pillow and she is wearing a white mu'umu'u I've never seen before. I shift my sore okole on the hard wooden seat and try to hear what the bishop is saying, but all I can make out is Heavenly Father this and Heavenly Father that. "Stop being ni'ele or I going pinch you," my sister, Ui, whispers to me. So I try to sit still.

Yesterday, we drove all the way from Kona to Naalehu. We had to stay with my Uncle Eddie Boy's family. I hate staying with them. My cousins are so lolo. I wanted to stay at Auntie Haole's house, but because of the funeral, Auntie Noe and Uncle Junior were staying there instead. The funeral is at the Mormon Church closest to Auntie Haole's house. We're Mormons, or that's what my mom says. On the wall of our dining room is a little picture with two hands in prayer. It says the family that prays together stays together. I don't get that. We pule all the time. We pule at breakfast, at lunch, and at dinner. I even have to pule before bed. All I want to do while I'm puleing is run away, but I can't. Where would I go? It's an island, and I can't swim to the mainland.

I hate the mu'umu'u my mom made me wear. I'm itchy. It's hot, and I feel trapped. Ui gives me the stink eye. She's three years older than me, and she thinks she can boss me around. I give her the stink eye back and shift my okole away from her pinching fingers and wonder why Auntie Haole is dead.

"What stay Leukemia?" I ask her.

“Wen one evil spirit entahs da body and stay make you real sick and den sometimes da evil spirit stay very strong and you end up dead.”

“How come get one evil spirit dat do dat?”

“How should I know! I not one Kahuna. How come you asking all kind questions? Kule kule or I going tell mom you stay making any kine.”

I’m not making any kine but I don’t say anything because I know if I talk back, she’s going to tell on me, and then I’m really going get dirty lickins for being kolohe in church. I don’t know if an evil spirit caused my Aunty to die, but I know plenty of people who have problems with evil spirits, and they don’t die. What about New Year’s Eve when we light the thousand firecrackers at the front door to our house. Isn’t that to make sure the evil spirits don’t get in? And every time we clean the house, mom goes around blessing everything with ti leaves and Hawaiian salt water. Did Aunty Haole not bless her house or light firecrackers to scare off the evil spirits?

The Bishop pules and we all say amene and then people start getting up from their seats. I think they are going to look at Aunty Haole. I hate having to wear this ugly mu’umu’u and the haku on my head. The damn bougainvillea flowers keep falling out, and the little branches keep poking me. At least Ui has to wear them, too. I hope she’s just as hot and itchy as I am. I give her the stink eye again, but she doesn’t see me. I wish I didn’t have to sit next to her. She pulls my hand away from where I am scratching under my bra strap. I just had to start wearing it, and it’s so annoying. Ui pulls me up from my seat and drags my brother by his elbow. He doesn’t want to go, but she pinches him under his upper arm just like mom does, and he moves. She drags us out into the aisle, “Hayaku! Move it or you goin’ lose it.”

As we walk, I remember when we used to visit her during the summer. She would let me play Pac Man and Pong on her Atari. She had cable, too, HBO, while all we got back home was The Movie Channel. She used to take me horseback riding around the ranch where she lived. It was on the edge of a cliff. There were huge pastures and little lava hills. I always wondered why the cows never ran off the edge. Aunty Haole used to let us sleep in. My mom never lets us do that. We always get up early, even if we don't have school, because we have to clean house or do yardwork. I hate yardwork. Aunty Haole, she let us sleep in, and then she would French braid our hair. She would let us eat the good cereal with marshmallows or the chocolate cereal that made chocolate milk while we watched cartoons. My mom would never let us watch TV while we ate, and she would never buy us good cereal. One time, mom ran out of milk and she made us eat corn flakes with powdered milk. I never want to do that again. I remember, one time, Aunty Haole made us taro pancakes. They were big, purple and fluffy. I spread plenty of butter all over the top and then drowned them in coconut syrup. They was so ono. I ate like ten.

When she took me horseback riding, she would tell me stories about Pele, the fire goddess. She said that Pele wasn't really one of the original Hawaiian gods. She came from somewhere else and tried to settle on each of the Hawaiian Islands. First, she tried Kauai, but it was too wet. Then, she moved over to Maui, but she got bored too quickly. Finally, she settled for the Big Island. That always reminded me of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, not too wet, not too boring, but just right! Some say she was a beautiful pale woman with bright fire hair, brighter than Aunty Haole's. Some of the people around Kau believe that they are her children. I bet Pele looks just like Aunty Haole. She would talk about Pele's many lovers, like Kamapua'a, the pig god. There's a place in Puna, south of Naalehu, that's all kapakahi called Ka lua o Pele. This is where Kamapua'a finally caught her. Aunty Haole told me that Pele would kill most of her

lovers because they couldn't survive her anger when she'd throw her lava at them. Kamapua'a was the only one who could call on the rain to stop her. He also had power over the plants and the wild boars. Every time Pele tried to cover the land with lava, he would make everything grow again.

Aunty Haole stopped our horses to look at the horizon. Even with the wind blowing so hard that you'd think you'd huli off your horse, seeing where the ocean touches the sky, the dark meeting the light, it somehow makes you just want to be quiet without being told to.

"Whachu smell?" She asked.

I took a breath and all I smelled was cow doo doo.

"Besides that, you kolohe kid."

"I dunno."

"Try think!"

So, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I thought about the ocean and the horses and the grasses we were riding in. I felt the wind and heard the surf. I opened my eyes and looked over at her. I wanted to tell her that I really didn't know what I was smelling, but she looked so peaceful. Her eyes were closed and her ehu hair blew across her pale smile.

"No worries," she said as she opened her eyes. "Just remember, you can always stop to smell the cow doo doo." She laughed. You know she's got a pretty laugh, not like my other aunties, whose whole bodies shake when they laugh. Aunty Haole's laugh floats in the air, falling on your ear, soft as plumeria petals.

We continued riding back to the stable as she told me about a Maui Ali'i named Ai' wohi ku pua, who was very handsome. While on his way to the Big Island to visit his lover, Laie, he met Pele. Of course, he didn't realize it was her, because she was in one of her very beautiful

human forms. He watched her surfing and he just had to have her. They made love that evening and he left her the very next morning. When he reached the Big Island, he was seduced by Polihau, the goddess of the snowcapped mountains. He took Polihau to Kauai with him, but Pele followed them. Being very jealous, she chased them until she got him back. When Ai' wohi ku pua dumped Polihau, she threw snow all over him and Pele until they separated. Then poor 'Ai wohi ku pua was all alone. Aunty Haole said that's what you get when you mess with the gods. I think the stories are funny because gods act just like they're in soap operas. I told Aunty Haole that Pele sounds like she belongs on TV, on *As the Ahupua'a Turns*.

Even though we are Mormons, we still pay attention to the rules, especially Pele's. Always pick up the old lady in white if you see her walking by the side of the road. Don't carry pork over Saddle Road. Don't remove any lava rocks from the island. We laugh at this rule because tourists think that they can get away with it, but every year they mail all the rocks back to Volcanoes National Park. They don't believe us when we say that it's bad luck to take lava. And they do it anyway. I giggle and my sister gives me the stink eye. Man, I'm gonna get it now. I look around and see that everyone is crying. Why am I not crying? I don't really want to see Aunty Haole in her coffin. Should I start crying? It's our turn and I see she has makeup on. She never wears makeup. She has too much blush on and there's a light brown smudge on the short lace collar of her mu'umu'u. I want to wipe it off, but I'm afraid to touch her. We move past the coffin and turn around, and I see Aunty Noe, Aunty Haole's mom, and she's crying. She's crying so much that her mascara is running down her face. Uncle Junior is trying to help her but he is crying too. I've never really seen adults cry, and to see Uncle Junior crying makes me start crying too. It hurts to cry. We walk past my mom, her brothers and sisters. I hug Aunty Noe and Uncle Junior. My hanabata starts to drip down to my mouth, and I rub it on Uncle Junior's dark

aloha shirt. It's rough against my nose. I don't mean to do it, and the people behind him stare at me. I move away and follow Ui back to our seat.

I need Kleenex, but there isn't any. I try to rub off the hanabata onto my mu'umu'u sleeve, but I know that if I do, I'm going to get it for messing it up. I try to stop crying, but I keep thinking about Uncle Junior's face when I finished hugging him. I heard that they had a son, too, but I've never met him. I think they said that he was in prison. I try to ask my sister if she has Kleenex but she says to kule kule as she pinches my brother to make him sit still. I wipe the hanabata with the back of my hand. We have to drive to the cemetery after the service. Where are they going to put all the bodies on the island when there is no more room? I guess they can dump them in the ocean. I wonder why they don't do that now.

The funeral was pau in the morning so that the luau could be in the evening. That, of course, means more work for us kids as the adults sit around drinking Budweiser. One time they let me try a sip. It tasted like shi shi, not that I ever drank my own shi shi, but it sure tasted like what I thought shi shi should taste like. I never understood why they drank so much. Most of the time it was okay because they would talk story and kanikapila, singing about the stars, the wind, the ocean, the land. Sometimes they would beef over stupid things, like when tutu died and no one helped pay for the funeral except for Aunty Noe and my mom. And dad would get so mad when Uncle Kainoa, mom's little brother, would say dad's not family just because he married my mom and that helping to pay for my tutu's funeral didn't make him part of the family either. They would almost throw blows, but some of the uncles, the ones who hadn't drank too much, would stop them. I don't understand why Uncle Kainoa would say that. He's always coming around our house, asking for money, at least that's what mom says.

After we get back from the cemetery, Auntie Mamo makes me sit next to a big ice chest and scoop opihi. I don't mind it so much. Their shells look like little black Chinaman's hats. I just don't like it when they curl up to grip my finger. Scooping opihi is easy, getting them is hard. Sometimes people die trying to pick opihi off the lava rocks. To get the really big ones, you have to climb out and hope the tide doesn't drag you out. My mom says that the best opihi comes from our side of the island. I pick up a spoon and start scooping the little buggahs out of their shells, dumping the opihi into one bucket and the shells into another. Sometimes the aunties would dry out the bigger shells for jewelry. When I was looking through my mom's jewelry Tupperware container, I found an opihi shell as big as my hand. It was all white, and I wondered how they got a black opihi shell to turn white. I asked my mom, and she said that they bleach in the sun. I never understood how people get red, brown, or black in the sun, but black opihi shells turn white. I want to change out of my mu'umu'u but the aunties won't let me because it's still a party, and girls needed to look pretty. I can't even take off my haku and I am still itchy.

When I am done with the opihi, Auntie Mamo makes me scrape coconuts for the haupia. She brings out a board that looks like a broken canoe paddle with a metal scraper on its end. Taking one of the open coconuts from the pile next to me, I bring the white meat to the sharp edge and start to scoop out the inside. My hand feels the loose hairs and rough texture of the shell. My haku shifts to the side as I lean forward to get a better grip. Little red petals drift down into the coconut meat. I'm gonna get it if I mess up the haupia. The petals turn see-through and I see Auntie Haole's pale cheeks covered with blush and her still too pale skin turning it from red to pink. We all stood by the grave. It was deep. I couldn't imagine putting her beautiful white coffin in all that muddy dirt. What will she do when she has to get out of it? Her beautiful white mu'umu'u will be stained and so will her white, white skin. I have always thought it was funny

that we called her Aunty Haole even though she wasn't. I try to get the petals out of the wet coconut meat, but I feel something move and I can't breathe and I'm not sure I want to. As I stood above her hole in the ground, I wanted to be riding with her out in the pasture, listening to her stories, smelling her scent. I cry into the haupia, and I know that I will get it, but I just keep scraping the soft white meat from its hard brown shell, while red petals fall.

“Pele's Daughter” first appeared in the *Guide to Kulchur Creative Journal*, Issue No. 5, 2015.