

## **You Always Smile When You Dance**

The dancers line up in their green and yellow dresses with the big ruffles around the waist, taking tiny steps to form an even line. But Eddie sits in the second row.

The music begins. But Eddie is still. This is all his body will allow. He is like a little red apapane with broken wings. Or more like a nene, a silly old goose.

He feels the sei, the rope of tuberose flowers in his hair. The Gracious Ladies gave it to him to wear, as if he were dancing with them. The sei's weight and fragrance make him feel like yes, he is the fragile little apapane.

But no, his body reminds him. His graceful motions are gone now. Now his shoulders and neck pinch together like a fist, pushing his flowered head down and forward. He is old and broken down.

On the little stage, Michael slaps his ipu heke, joining the recording of guitar and flute. Beside him, Stephanie begins to sing. Such a lovely smile. The ladies begin to rotate their hips and arms. It is one of his favorite Liliuokalani songs. Queen Liliuokalani. Stephanie sings "He 'ala nei e moani mai nei." The Gracious Ladies step up and back and roll their hips. Their hands and arms sway and wave from the elbow, shoulder and wrist.

The shortest oldest dancer, a Filipina named Norma, catches his eye from her corner of the stage and loves him with a huge smile. Eddie raises his hand just a little, and waves of his fingers.

"Are you okay?" It's the woman beside him who they sent to bring him to the show. He can't remember her name. "Do you feel sick?" She touches his arm. She thinks he is waving to her, right beside him. As if he were mute.

He looks back to the dancers. "I'm fine, dear." Except for the cancer eating him away. Except that he can't dance. Or sing. Except that he is an old nene goose.

"They look beautiful up there," the woman whispers, trying to sound generous but sounding surprised. *For being so old, she doesn't say.*

Eddie clears his throat. "Yes. They always look beautiful." He wants other people to hear him. But they do not. His voice is whisper-weak even when he doesn't want it to be.

The woman slides her hand down his arm, to rest on top of his hand. His hand still has the purple and yellow IV bruises from the hospital four days ago. She squeezes his hand to try to make him feel better. A nice thing to do, but Eddie resents the distraction from hula.

When Eddie his father's farm in China for Hawai'i, his name was Qian and he was twenty years old. A hundred flowers and a great leap forward had made his father poor and worried for his future income. He had just enough money hidden to send one of his children on the huge boat to Hawai'i, where the adult child would send money back to the family. Each of his four older children had specific work to do on the farm, so it was the youngest Qian they loaded up one night to go to Hawai'i. "It soon will be a part of the United States. Believe me." These were the last words his father said to him. Qian did not believe him, but he was glad to go.

Qian wanted to be in California. And not for the old Gold Mountain reasons. He wanted to go to California to find a man, to fall in love with a man. A man who would love him and make him happy. That seemed possible in California.

Hawai'i was not as far as California, but it was different from China. In Hawai'i, bodies were darker. Men dressed more like women. Everything was slow. And it rained. All the time in Hilo it rained.

He needed a new name, so he chose an American name. He chose "Eddie" because of all the handsome singing Eddies who were so big when he arrived at Hawai'i. Fisher, Arnold, Cochran.

Eddie found a chicken farm to work on. That's what he knew. The chickens lived on the side of a steep hill overlooking a dense forest of trees with huge wide flat leaves that looked like nothing in China. Eddie and the other two workers every morning climbed across the muddy hill in their little sandals to search for hidden eggs laid by protective chickens. He did not miss his family, though he did send a little money. He wondered if the money made it to his father. He thought about the kind of man he might find in California.

After a couple years at the chicken farm on the side of the hill, Eddie became friends with the boss's wife Evelyn. Evelyn was tall, and slim for a married lady. She wore her hair in an Audrey Hepburn beehive with a long ponytail. She helped Eddie with his English. He studied at night with books she let him borrow. And then, Evelyn took him to a large family dinner, outside with a big roast pig and pineapple. There Eddie first saw hula. At the outside party, he felt hula.

Eddie was transfixed. The sweet flow of the Hawaiian words, so different from the abrupt and demanding sound of Chinese and English. The rich rustling of the guitar, the slow pop-pop of the drums. The dancing together smooth and smiling and open and free. He couldn't understand the words, but that did not matter. Eddie looked for hula every time he went out to the beach or any busy place. Soon he learned where to find it, and he got away from the farm and stand off behind the clusters of white tourists to soak it all in.

A little while later, at the funeral for Evelyn's aunt who died in the tsunami, Eddie's own hula began. He was sitting with Evelyn and her sister Susan at the drink table outside, guarding the Blue Nun wine. Guarding it because they didn't want the kids drinking it, because Evelyn said wine was expensive in Hilo and they didn't want to waste it on the kids. Evelyn and Susan were talking in low voices behind the

drink table, getting up to pour Coca-Cola or lemonade when someone came by. Eddie understood about half of what they said in their pretty English, their expressive rhythm making the flat square words worth listening to. He laughed when they laughed.

The conversation turned to familiar complaints: Hawaiian men get fat when they get old, and the sex is bad because the men are so lazy. Eddie enjoyed this topic. Even though it was a funeral, Susan used dramatic hand gestures that made it easy to follow along. She did “fat belly” and “sex act” with her hands. They laughed.

A Hawaiian man stopped at the drink table and silenced them with a wide smile. He was very handsome, with a wide face and deep brown eyes. His teeth were very large and straight.

“Hello,” the man said, smiling even bigger. He looked at Eddie. Eddie stared back.

“Hello,” said the three back to the man. Evelyn reached over and gave Eddie’s arm a push, for him to stand up. Eddie stood up.

The man said something to Eddie, a question. Eddie didn’t understand him.

Evelyn stood up and pushed a wine bottle along the table to Eddie. “Here it is,” she said, so Eddie would understand. She handed Eddie a paper cup and sat back down. A hula began to play over the big speakers propped in the house windows. Eddie loved this music. He and the man were still staring at each other.

“Blue Nun,” said Eddie, knowing these words and hoping the fact that they were short would hide his accent.

“Please. Thank you.” The man laughed in a friendly way.

Eddie felt big and free. Without thinking, his hips gave a happy little sway to the music. He caught himself and stopped. He felt himself blushing. He looked down to pour the wine.

The man was pleased. "You hula."

Eddie wanted to say yes. He wanted to dance for this man. But he didn't know hula. Only the first arm movements. Waves on water. One of Susan's daughters had taught him a couple months ago. He didn't say anything. He handed the cup to the man. Their hands touched.

"Will you dance hula for me?" the man asked. Evelyn and Susan both made a surprise noise from behind Eddie.

When a Hawaiian person asks you to hula, and you are a Hawaiian person who dances hula, then you dance hula. You can't refuse. Honor, history, family pride, love of home. These were the reasons that Evelyn had managed to explain to Eddie.

"No, no hula," Eddie said, hearing his Chinese accent.

The man's name was Glen. Three months after that picnic, he moved Eddie in to his house on the other side of the island, Kona side, where it did not rain all the time and there were more nice houses. Eddie quit his job at the chicken farm. He started dancing hula with Susan's daughter's group in Kona.

Eddie tried the men's hula parts at first. But the songs he loved the most, and the way he wanted to dance with his hips more than arms and legs, these things made him long for the female role. After almost a year, and after one week practicing the question, he asked. "Miss Coreen, can I try the other part?"

The leader glanced up at Eddie's finger, stuck out pointing to the women's line. "Sure, babe, do what comes natural. That's the way hula should be done, don't you agree?"

From then on, Eddie was a girl in hula. The women giggled and welcomed him with coos and playful little nudges of their hips to his. The hula men didn't seem to care.

He practiced in the kitchen of Glen's house while he made dinner. When he held a knife or the handle of a pan, he did his arm motions with only a little flip of elbow. After work, Glen would take off his suit and shower, and they would eat dinner. Then, after cleaning up the kitchen, Eddie would dance for Glen. He would enter the living room, take off his shirt, and dance one or two songs in front of the large windows. During the warmest months, the sun would start to set orange behind him while he danced. Eddie was beautiful. Glen would sit totally still, watching Eddie's body move in a more and more relaxed and natural flow as the weeks and months passed. Eddie's hips revolved and pushed gently toward and away from Glen. Glen watched from the leather chair with his glass of vodka. The songs on the records Eddie got from hula friends told stories of the emotional lives of birds and flowers and ocean breezes. Then they would make love.

It was a quiet life. Glen did not talk a lot. Hula was easier than English. Eddie learned English more slowly now, as much from television as from conversation.

The Hawaii years were the best years of Eddie's life. He felt this, and he tried to make them last. And they did last. Eddie didn't visit his family in China, though he promised in the rare letter that he would. He sent a little money when Glen said it was okay.

Then suddenly, or suddenly for Eddie, they packed up the little house and moved to California. To Oakland. A business opportunity, Glen said, in the car selling business. Also, Glen said he was sick of the small island life. Eddie was afraid to lose hula, but it was California. And it was Glen.

Eddie got a job to help pay for the house they rented. Like the house on Hilo, it was on a hill and had a view of the sunset from big windows in the living room. Eddie found a job at a health clinic. His Mandarin got him hired. He did fine at the job in the filing room. The work was easy compared to the chicken farms. He could work slowly. He enjoyed talking to Chinese people again. Glen didn't seem to care to watch him anymore, so Eddie never danced after dinner in California.

After a few years, Eddie found hula. Someone at the clinic mentioned hula one day. There was hula in California. The group met at a church building.

In the hula group, the teacher again did not mind that Eddie wanted to dance with the women. This was good because, now that he danced with the older group, there were no other men. Now he was a Gracious Lady.

"Sing out, ladies," said the leader, until all the women but Eddie were singing the songs about love and the ocean and flowers and people pining for the islands. Eddie was afraid at first to sing out loud. He would have to sing the girl parts. And he had never sung to anyone, not even to Glen. He only sung to himself. But he knew most of the words to so many songs.

"Eddie, don't you sing?" said Nina one day. Nina was young, but she always sat and watched with great attention when Eddie and the rest of the Gracious Ladies danced.

Eddie giggled, not something he usually did. "No, dear, just in my own head. I love Lili 'uokalani's songs."

"Of course," Nina agreed. "And you should sing. It makes it more fun. It makes your heart ..." She put her hands over her heart like praying. "... join your hips!" She put her hands on her hips and dipped and rolled. "Right?" She winked. They both laughed. Like he laughed with Evelyn.

From then on he sang. Quiet at first, and then louder as the others encouraged him. He learned more songs, more Hawaiian words. He was happy again, like in the first sunset house in Kona.

A while after Eddie began singing out loud at hula, Glen left. He went back to Hawaii. He didn't ask Eddie what Eddie wanted to do. So Eddie just let him go.

Eddie moved into a small apartment near the health clinic, which was not a good neighborhood but was what he could afford with his paycheck. He bought a little red car from someone at the clinic. Two girls from the hula group taught him how to drive. One newspaper box was all he smashed with his car.

Other hula groups started to ask him to join them, to dance with their Gracious Ladies but more to sing. People called his voice a counter-tenor, it was so high and strong. Eddie drove his little car all over, from Berkeley to San Ramon, to Fremont. The hula groups that were mostly women, some mostly Filipina, some more Japanese-Hawaiian, some a mix of white, black, Latina, all kinds of Asian. He met another Chinese man at one group. Eddie laughed at the girls in terrycloth headbands and legwarmers at hula. Like it was an aerobics class.

The years passed. The area around his apartment got more dangerous and then less dangerous, and then more dangerous again. Gunshots at night. People driving around slowly watching each other. Teddy bears and flowers and cardboard-box R.I.P. signs piled up where someone was shot. Eddie was a fixture though, in his apartment building and around the sidewalks. So people watched out for him. The young handsome black men in too-big jeans would nod to Eddie, flash him a smile.

He decided that making people know him kept him safe. Once he thought people were forgetting him, so he took some hibiscus flowers from a hula show and wore them in his hair to the corner store. "Look at *her*," a fat Filipina girl said to everyone around. He did a little hula step and gave her the flower and made a friend. Divina was her name. Then he felt known again, safe.

Aches and pains were normal now, day to day, but Eddie stayed with hula. After a few days of extra pain in his low back and some other unpleasant things in the bathroom that scared him, a doctor at work did



tests on him and told him that he had cancer. The cancer was in his bladder. He went to the hospital during the day for medicine and radiation. He got worse with vomiting and sleep that did not feel good. Then he got better and slowly went back to work and then back to hula. Then the cancer was back, in his bones this time. He had to stay and sleep in the hospital. More radiation, more medicine, more vomiting, more bad sleep, more pain. Hula ladies visited him and brought him bird-of-paradise flowers and mango slices and ginger ale.

When he got out of the hospital, he went back to work part-time. People didn't need his help much at all now. The file room was used less and less. People stayed at the computers. Eddie would sing hula songs and dance in the file room very slowly now because he was frail. "Frail elderly" is what they called people like him at the clinic. He looked up hula shows on the computer. To be useful and so they wouldn't decide to take his job away, Eddie started to feed the clinic from the file room, big salads and tuna fish sandwiches for the waves of beautiful medical students and other new staff coming through. It was like Glen's kitchen. Alone most of the day with hula. Showing his value through food.

After the hospital stay, one of the girls from hula would call each week to ask if he wanted a ride to hula. Sometimes he said yes. Sometimes he was too weak and tired, so he had to say no. When he went to hula, he would stand beside the wall and lean on his clear plastic cane with the ribbons tied on it. Eddie would sway a little while the ladies danced, just to be with them and with the hula. He would sway and hum the song until he had to sit down.

Tonight, the Gracious Ladies stand in their line, breathing deeply between songs. Hands are beside hips, fingers curled just so into little O-shapes. All down the line, one bare foot is flat on the stage, while the other heel is lifted and the knee bent. The next hula song begins. It is "Hilo E." About Eddie's home on the islands, where he first landed and first found hula. He taught them this song. It is short and has easy

words. It is about the lehua flower in a lei and where it grows. Stephanie begins to sing, and turns her big smile to Eddie. The hula leader turns from her seat in the front row. She winks at him. He smiles.

Eddie watches his friends dance, flowers in their hair just like his. You always smile when you dance. It is the first thing he remembers from his first hula group in Hilo. He was so in love with hula that he thought he was in love with the man he danced for. *You always smile when you dance.* It is not a command to look cheerful. It is how hula works.

Eddie sniffs and swallows carefully, to stop his tears and to see if his throat will work for him. He opens his mouth to sing along with Stephanie onstage, about the lehua grove. He makes a scratchy squawky sound. Not a counter-tenor, just a goose or a little hurt bird. Is there a hula about a nene?

The woman next to him is startled by his squawking noise. "Are you alright, Mister Eddie?" she whispers, placing her hand on his hand again.

Eddie clears his throat. They dance the Hilo song for him. He smiles at his Gracious Ladies. "Yes, dear, I am fine. I am just an old man now."