

WOOING ELIZABETH

When people asked my Aunt Elizabeth about Uncle Mike, she would tell them, “Oh, he’s at HCC,” hoping they would think he was teaching classes or something at Honolulu Community College, when in reality, anyone who knew anything about him would know she really meant the Halawa Correctional Center. He was serving a four-year sentence in minimum security for fraud—“simple fraud,” he would remind me every visit—for impersonating a *nakahodo*, or traditional Japanese matchmaker, who had died ten years earlier on an outer island. Uncle Mike had been really good at handicapping grooms, brides, families, and occupations the way he used to handicap jockeys, horses, trainers, and track conditions. By transforming his extensive bookmaking knowledge with its probabilities and percentages and leveraging the reputation of the real *nakahodo*, he had created a clientele and a growing reputation for himself on Oahu. Up until the day he was arrested, he would say he owed all of his success to Elizabeth, the woman who had “taught him the bonds of true love.”

Aunt Elizabeth was my real aunt, deeded by blood and my mother’s only sister, whereas Uncle Mike had only married in. However, not unlike the sympathy engendered between wary neighbors when faced by a common enemy, I always felt close to the men who became our uncles by marriage to Elizabeth. I could not imagine marriage with Aunt Elizabeth, the most grown-up person I knew. She was pretty—“pretty like the serpent in the Garden of Eden,” as my mother liked to say—and the only woman in our family who wore high heels all of the time. Never

once had I seen her in the flats our mothers had retired to long ago. She smoked like a movie star, elegantly and continuously, through long black holders to avoid leaving smears of lipstick on the cigarette, a sight she found vulgar. And like many great personalities, she habitually spoke of herself in the third person, a tendency I discovered at the age of five, when I brought her my favorite board game. She looked down at me, arched her perfectly plucked eyebrow into a talon and said, “No one has explained it to you, have they?”

I shook my head.

“Aunt Elizabeth doesn’t do this shit,” she said, “She doesn’t play Chutes n’ Ladders.”

She paused to blow smoke in my face. “Do you understand?”

I nodded, “Aunt Elizabeth is no fun.”

“Good boy,” she said patting my head like a puppy. “Now run along and find that useless uncle of yours so he can get Aunt Elizabeth a drink.”

So Uncle Mike and I grew close, drawn by our completely opposite yet similarly intense feelings for Elizabeth, and it seemed natural when he recruited me to be his assistant. Business had really picked up at that point, with Uncle Mike attending anywhere from six to ten weddings a weekend, and when he looked at me, he saw a branch office, an expansion of his matrimonial services. At first, he tried to involve me in every aspect of the business, explaining the arcane ranking system he plugged into the elaborate equations he had developed for producing lasting marriages at a ninety-three percent success rate, the highest of any *naka-hodo* in the islands, and far above that of his namesake. But after a few months, it became apparent to both of us that I was not worthy of the profession. “Match-making is a matter of patient observation,” he would say. Clearly, at fourteen, I was neither patient nor observant enough. The women I judged too ugly he would relabel as kind and point out my oversight: her second toe was longer than her big toe—a sure sign of intelligence. The guys I okayed as husband material he would just groan at and point out they came straight to the interview from a hasty shower with hair still wet, an indication of a hidden family history of mental abnormalities (wet hair = soft head). “You can’t rush to judge,” he told me once. “It’s like picking a melon.” By the end, I was involved only in the purely clerical aspects of the business—setting up the client meetings, routing photos to parents and prospectives, updating the rosters of potentials, and keeping his calendar of appointments—areas at which I excelled by keeping careful and comprehensive notes. Notes that turned out to be quite helpful to state prosecutors.

Still, after he was convicted (“not by the clients, did you notice none of them testified for the prosecution?”) and sentenced (“even the judge admitted that on

balance I had probably produced more happiness in the world than pain”) and publicly disavowed by Aunt Elizabeth (“that crack about men being unreliable income hurt worst of all”), Uncle Mike continued to keep up a relationship with me, much to the dismay of the family. For the four years he was locked up, as I moved from freshman to senior in high school, he sent me letters and packages regularly. They were a great embarrassment to my mother and her sister because they smelled like the ashtray of a hotel lobby and were stamped all over in red ink: “NOTE: This correspondence has been sent by an inmate of the Halawa Correctional Center.” Mother would burn with shame and apologize to the mailman profusely every time he delivered a package from Uncle Mike, but I suspect the mailman looked forward to these deliveries as much as I did. He would always ask me about them the next day, and I would show him the latest prison handi-craft Uncle Mike had created: an American flag made from strips of pornographic magazines with cigarette filter stars, a portrait of Jesus made from cigarette ash and hair from the prison barbershop, iridescent black earrings and matching necklace made from cockroach carapaces, and an evening bag made from the silver foil of used cigarette packs which I was to give to the “girl who had eyes, well, eye for me.”

That was his little joke. Sara, the girl, did not even know I existed. But throughout his incarceration he had seen my growing interest in members of the fairer sex and was the only one in my family who seemed genuinely interested in my burgeoning romantic life (“no one longs for romance more than a prisoner”). So I had told him about my attraction to a girl in my class who terrified me with her haughty demeanor and fatal vanity. Most of the other guys in school called it a defect, but as I explained to Uncle Mike, Sara’s eye, not the plain right eye but the left one with its languid eyelid, drooped so seductively that she simultaneously wore an expression of schoolgirl innocence and a madame’s world-weary disdain. While her regular eye stood as naked as the day she was born, Sara favored the other eyelid with shadow in dramatic hues of blue and green, applied with a heavy hand. She was like no other girl in school, and that eye summoned all my young blood. When residual tremors worked her eyelid into a perpetual coquettish half-wink, it was like a flashing beacon to me, a green light in my age of stumbling adolescence.

For years I admired her from afar, sitting in our English classes, watching her read from the misanthropic admonitions of Frost at the front of the class. As she tilted her head back to expose her alabaster neck, the good eye opened wide like a gun fighter sighting along the barrel, while the other fluttered like a gaudy butterfly wing, as if to wink at everyone in the room at once. I purposefully sabotaged my own math tests and quizzes, just so I could remain in her classes and sit close