

Smile from the Soul

By
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Mel and I are at odds with each other over all kinds of stuff, even when it comes to ethnic identity. She and I are similar in nationality, but in her mind, we are still opposites. I say that I am Hawaiian-Chinese and she considers herself Chinese-Hawaiian. We laugh when we have to check a box designating our ethnic background. She chooses Asian and I choose Pacific Islander. It's hysterical. We are about the same age, early forties. I think I look younger than she does. She disagrees of course.

She is on the thin side, but out of shape. She is one of those people who never really gets fat. She just sort of sags all over. She has admitted that her draping polyester clothes and bras with padding and extra lift cover a multitude of issues. I am taller than she is, but only by a couple of inches. I am not thin, I am not fat. I am not in shape myself, but I can still manage to take the stairs

without killing myself. My grandmother called me momona, which means fat, but in a good way, like a fat juicy mango.

Mel has a friendly smile when she chooses to show it. She's kind of grouchy in general. She has the best scolding face I have ever seen. She has Asian slanted dark brown eyes that miss nothing. She has been my best friend for so many years that whenever I do something it's almost as if I have to check with her first. She is the same way.

Her husband jokingly grumbled that when they go on trips, she has to ask me if she can go. After so many years of dealing with us, he sometimes talks to me about trips he wants to take before even asking her if she wants to go. The funny thing is that once he wanted to take a vacation and go diving in the Caribbean. I told him that she would hate it. She likes to swim, and snorkel, but she probably wouldn't want to take diving lessons and wear the tank. He told me he thought he could talk her into it. I was right, he was wrong. They went to the Grand Canyon that year. She and I disagree on a lot of things, but we knew each other better than anyone else. Best friends are like that.

Mel works for the State of Hawaii as an administrator of one of the many education programs aimed at disadvantaged families. She complains about her job constantly.

"Bureaucrats, every last one of them," she exclaims. "All they are interested in doing is showing off their shiny cars and talking out their asses about how they are working to effect change. The only thing they are working to change is keeping their kids out of public school and in private ones. They couldn't care less about the

general public. They like to talk about how they are working for the best of the public, when in fact they spend more time and effort making themselves seem more important than they really are.”

Her soapbox gets a workout pretty regularly. Her doctor has already warned her about her stress level. Once she starts on a rant, she’s like a hurricane. All you can do is hang on until it’s over and clean up afterwards. When people tell her to quit her job and give her blood pressure a rest, she shakes her head and says, “But what will happen to the kids?”

She was of course referring to the nameless, faceless children she sees every time she drives past the poorer sections of the island. The ones she sees running around barefoot in the middle of the street. Some still in diapers with snot running down their faces, and no adult in sight. These were the kids that caused her not to sleep well at night.

These are the kids that make her fight even harder for funding even knowing that the most desperate of families may never see a dime of that money. She knows the system is flawed. She knows there is also a lot of fraud that occurs within the system.

She tells me that in spite of all that there are families that genuinely need the help and are not abusing the system. These are the people that the system was designed to help and for that reason, it must continue despite its flaws. It is our responsibility to help them.

While she’s blabbering out this idealistic drivel, she also tells me repeatedly that she is not altruistic in any way for doing what she does. It’s just her job. I know it’s not, but I let her think she’s convinced me.

Her logic is that if she helps one kid stay out of trouble, it will be one kid who won't break into someone's house looking for something to trade for drugs. It could also be the one kid she keeps out of prison for theft, assault, or worse, murder. She knows she can't save them all. No one can, but she believes, if you manage to save one, just one, it's worth it. I believe it too.

So did my tutu. I was one of those kids with snot running down my face. I was often in the street with no shoes, a soggy diaper, and no shirt. My tutu always kept an eye on me though. Once she caught up with me, I got my nose wiped, my butt cleaned and a shirt pulled over my head. Shoes were still optional. This is Hawaii after all, but if there was even a small chance there was glass on the ground, she would put shoes on my feet so fast I wouldn't know what hit me.

She was very conscious of things that could hurt me. For the first four years of my life if she could have arranged it, I would have walked around wearing bubble wrap. Once I fell down and scraped my knee and she realized I wasn't going to die, she got over it. I got the normal scrapes, bumps and bruises that all little kids with any energy do. She just made sure to have lots of antibacterial spray and Band-Aids in the house. She did all this for me. My mother never did.

My mother was usually off to wherever with her latest boyfriend. She had the good fortune of being considered an island beauty. She turned heads wherever she went. Men tripped over their own feet when walking over to talk to her. Tutu said she attracted men like flies on shit and most of them had more guts than brains. She changed boyfriends so often that when I was younger I

barely remembered them.

When I got a little older I tried to keep track of them. Tutu said not to bother, it didn't matter what their names were. Mom wouldn't keep them long enough for it to matter. Mom never spent time with anyone for long, not even me.

Over the years I learned to meet her boyfriends, be polite to them and wonder how long it would take before she broke up with them. Either that or they finally realized that she only wanted them for what they could give her.

They were like the toy blocks I had when I was little. I would use them to build what I wanted. If I wanted to use one of a different color, all I had to do was switch it out. My blocks, like her boyfriends, were interchangeable.

I suspected she probably would have aborted me if Tutu hadn't stepped in and made her have me. My aunty told me years later that Tutu told my mom when she was pregnant that she better have me or else. Tutu couldn't stand the thought of her having an abortion or should I say, have another one.

Tutu suspected that I would not have been my mother's first abortion and she was pretty sure there were some after I was born. When Tutu found out my mom was pregnant and had intended to put an end to me, Tutu told her she should take a tent with her the next time she went out. If she aborted me, she would be living on the beach.

My mom wasn't a complete idiot. She was not about to give up the roof over her head. She behaved herself long enough for me to slide out then she was off and running as if I had never happened. After that, for the most part it was just me and Tutu.

Now that I'm older, I thank God that my mother

didn't raise me. I would have really been screwed up. Although in my mother's defense, if the behavior of Tutu's children were any indication, Tutu wasn't a perfect parent in her time either. My mother and her siblings all had their issues.

Drinking, drugs, gambling, solicitation, and assault were on the list. You name it, they did it. I was lucky that I got the benefit of all the things Tutu wished she had done with them.

I think I turned out better than any of them. Tutu was a much better parent the second time around. Of course it didn't help that her husband had passed away leaving her with four little kids. It was probably a lot easier with just me.

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