

Erin Spofford

e.spofford.writer@gmail.com

Late Morning Tea

by Erin Spofford

Outside the sliding glass door of the hotel room, on the lanai, Peggy lifted the gold rim of the porcelain teacup, so smooth against her lips, and took a sip of her steaming-hot tea. Her face pinched together as she swallowed, adding new wrinkles to her aged skin. She set the fine china teacup back onto its saucer, delicate notes ringing in the cool Pacific air.

“Sixty years. Can you believe that?” Peggy said.

Phil sat across from Peggy. A wicker coffee table with a glass top separated them. Phil's crisp white suit matched the white wicker of his patio chair. Phil smiled and said, “We had some good times, didn't we?”

“We had some great times,” Peggy said. Past the open patio door, inside the hotel room, were two queen sized beds separated by a nightstand. “To think, we were a couple of giggling virgins the last time we were here.”

“It was fun figuring it all out, eh?” Phil said, resting his elbows on his knees.

Peggy sat silent. Carried in on the ocean breeze, the sweet fragrance of plumeria flowers permeated the outdoor air. The corners of her mouth lifted into a nostalgic smile. After a moment, the smile waned. The wicker creaked as she leaned forward and took a sip of her tea, steam blowing away as she exhaled through her nose. She winced while she swallowed. Peggy's hand trembled. Her thin, delicate skin, like a skeleton's hand draped in chiffon, missed the saucer and set the teacup down on the glass tabletop with a sharp ceramic clink.

“There was only one bed when we were here,” Peggy said. “And, they replaced those beautiful hedges with this ugly fence.”

Phil laughed, big and loud. “That's why I love you, Peggy, your memory for details.”

“Don't even get me started on those gaudy bedspreads,” said Peggy. “The colors they use these days are so obnoxious. You would've hated them.”

“Probably,” Phil said, grinning at Peggy's passion. “But, remember, you don't have to worry about that once you're here.”

Tears formed around the edges of Peggy's eyes. Wiping them away with her bony knuckles, she reached for her cup of tea and fell forward. She caught herself, grabbing the edge of the coffee table. Lowering herself, slow and careful, she came to rest on the lanai's cold concrete slab. Peggy put one arm on the table for support then picked up her tea and took a sip.

"How long has it been?" Phil asked.

Peggy's hand shuddered, spilling a small amount of tea onto the table as she put the cup back down. "Sixty years, dear. Didn't I say that?" She ran her thin finger through the spilt tea and then put the finger into her mouth.

"I mean, how long since I died?" Phil asked.

Peggy looped her fingers through the handle of the cup and raised it up off the table. The cup hovered near her mouth, but she didn't drink. Phil's skin was flawless and youthful, his full head of silky black hair untouched by the steady Hawaiian breeze. "Two years," she said.

"I've missed you," Phil said.

"And I you," Peggy said. "I can't believe I've lasted this long without you."

"You never needed me."

"I've always needed you, even before I met you, I needed you. You kept me—"

"Grounded," Phil said, finishing her sentence.

Peggy's head lolled to one side as she turned to face Phil. "Yes. You let me create and live. And always pulled me back down when I got too high. You... You..." Her eyes, pupils dilated, flicked about quick as a hummingbird. The cold of the concrete slab spread through her tan polyester pants. Still holding the tea cup in her hands, she tried to get back into her chair but gave up halfway through the attempt and sat back down on the slab.

Phil leaned back in his wicker chair. "How are you feeling?"

"Hm?" Peggy said, awakening from her reverie. "Nauseous, lightheaded," she said. "It's getting hard to see clear. Think clear."

"I'm telling you, you're going to love it here, Peggy," Phil said. "It's nothing like what they say. It's hardly even hot."

She put the teacup down on the glass tabletop, almost dropping it, then hacked out a sudden, vicious cough. Three drops of blood landed on the empty porcelain saucer. The blood contrasted against the polished white as it dribbled down into the center of the plate, forming a glistening ring of red. Peggy wiped her lips with the palm of her hand.

"How do you think the children will take it?" Phil asked.

"They'll be fine," Peggy said and cleared her throat. "They don't talk to me anyways. They blame me for letting you do it." Peggy wept. Her tears flowing fast. Her voice thick with

emotion, she said, “At first, grief consumed me, and I was in denial, but now I’ve accepted that they’re right. I could have stopped you.”

“I wouldn’t have let you,” Phil said.

“I could have tried.”

“You did try. I was incorrigible.”

“You always were too generous,” Peggy said as her tears mingled with the fresh blood dripping from her nostril.

“Stop. Don’t blame yourself,” Phil said. “I drank myself to death, not you.”

Peggy chuckled, morbid and sardonic. “Well, until today,” she said, lifting the teacup.

Phil laughed his big, loud laugh. “You always did have a wry wit.”

“And soon I always will,” Peggy said and took a final sip of her tea.